

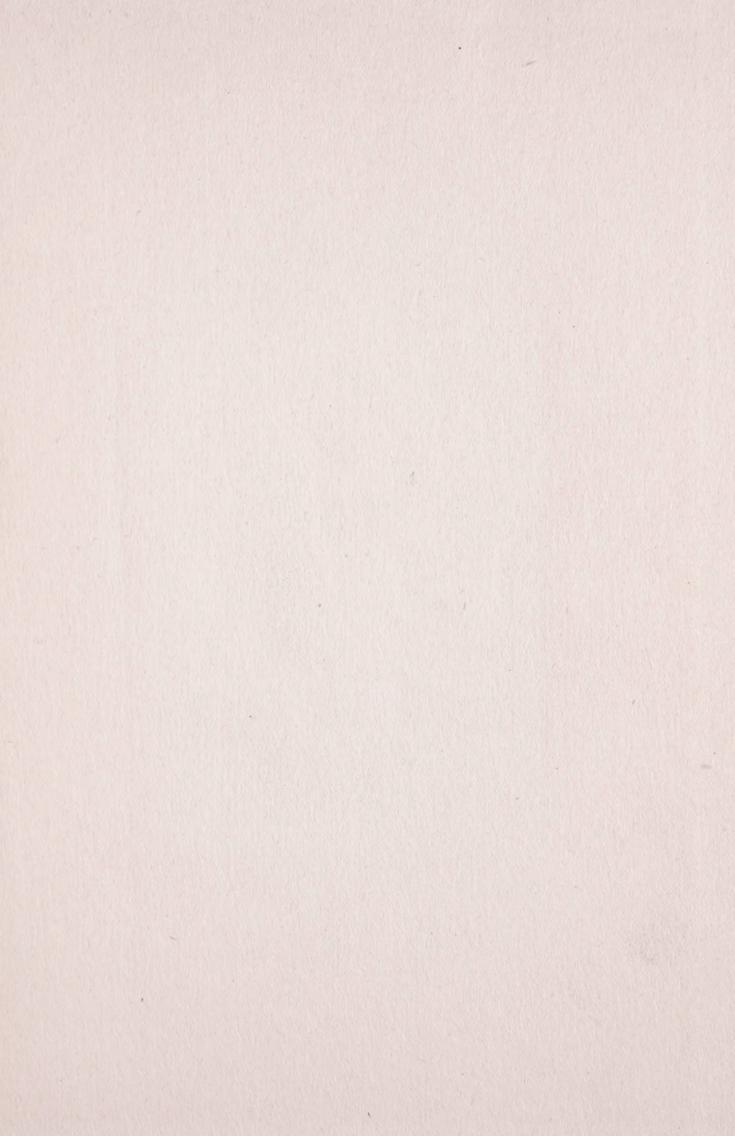
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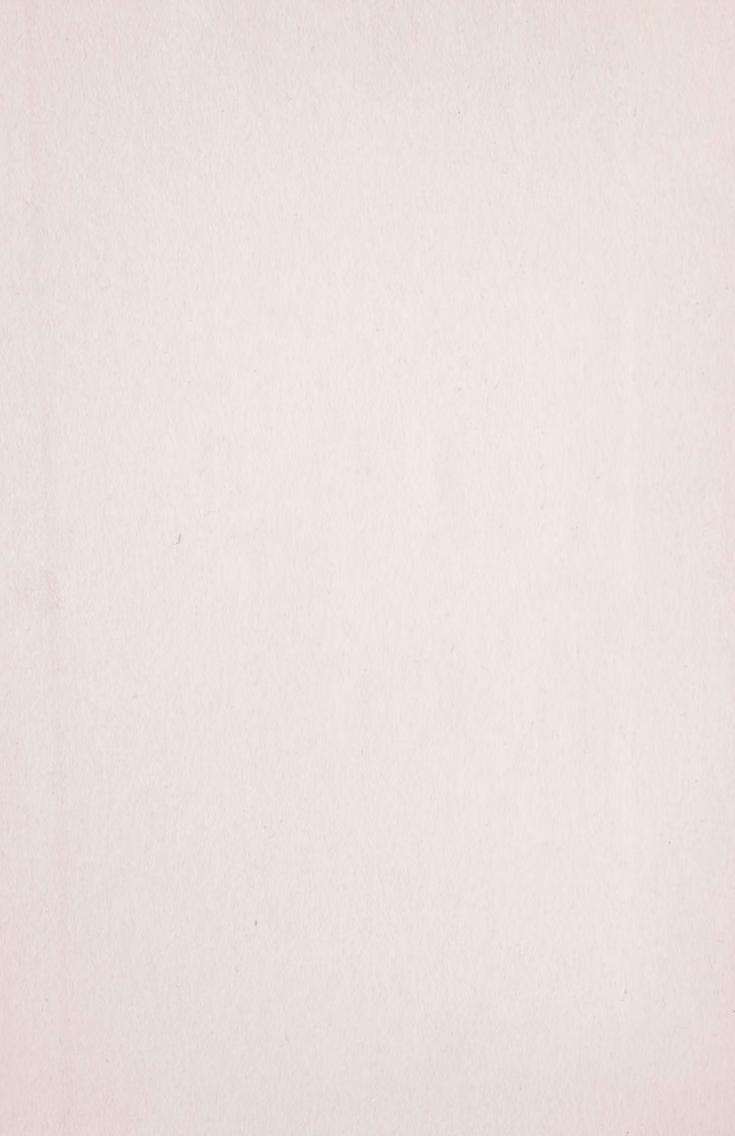


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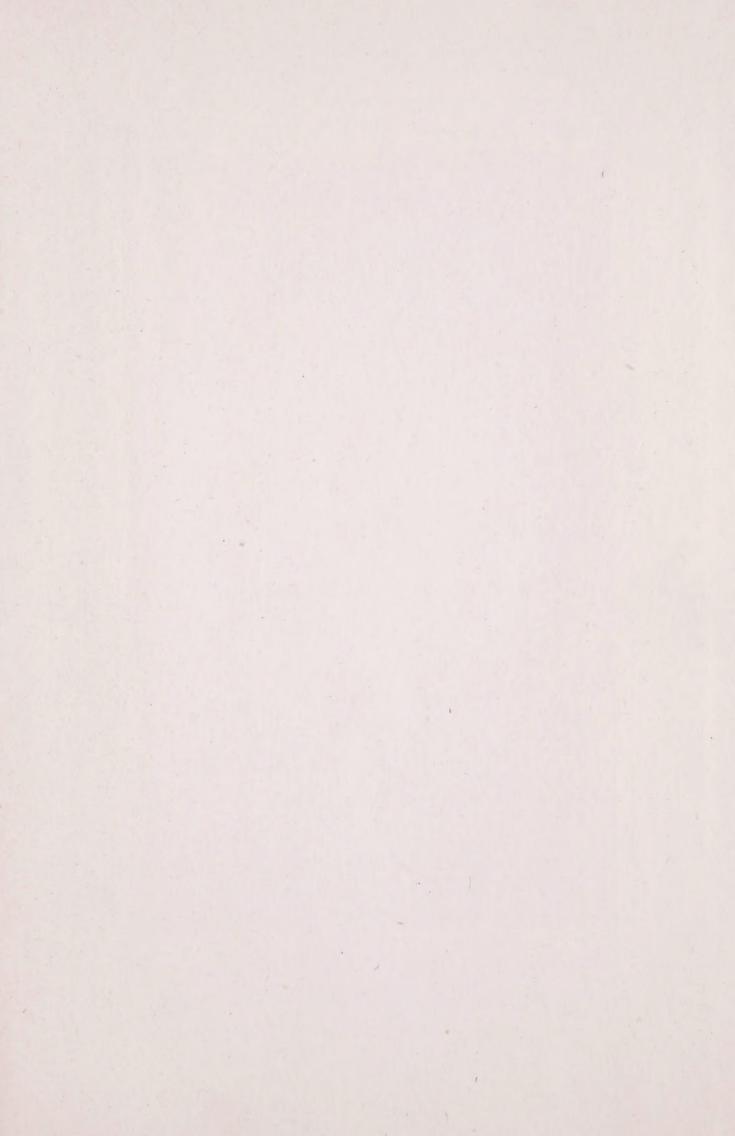
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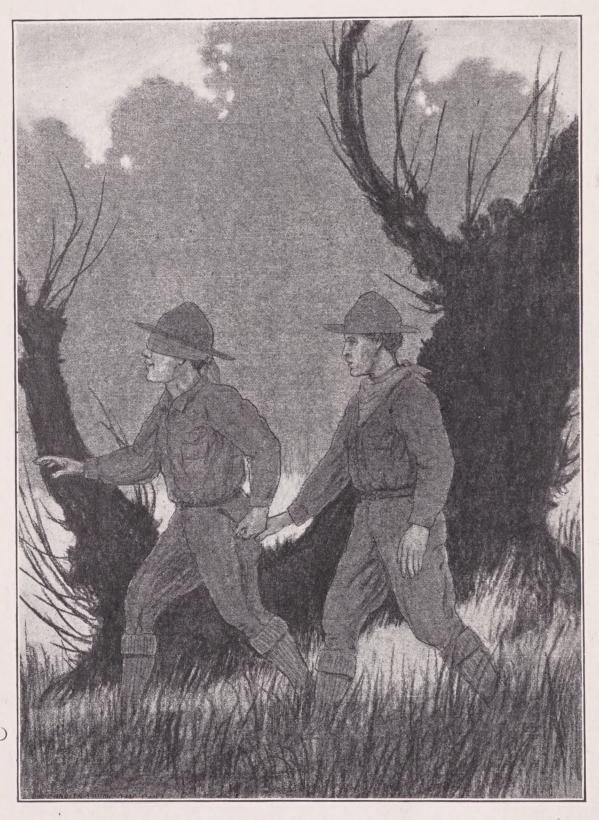




THE BOY SCOUTS AT CAMP LOWELL

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"SLOWLY HE BEGAN TO TURN FROM THE DIRECTION IN WHICH NED HAD FACED HIM"

(See page 90)

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The Boy Scouts At Camp Lowell

By BREWER CORCORAN

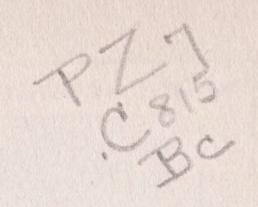
Author of "The Boy Scouts of Kendallville," "The Boy Scouts of The Wolf Patrol," "The Barbarian," "The Princess Naida," "The Road to Le Rêve," etc.

Illustrated by CHARLES LIVINGSTON BULL



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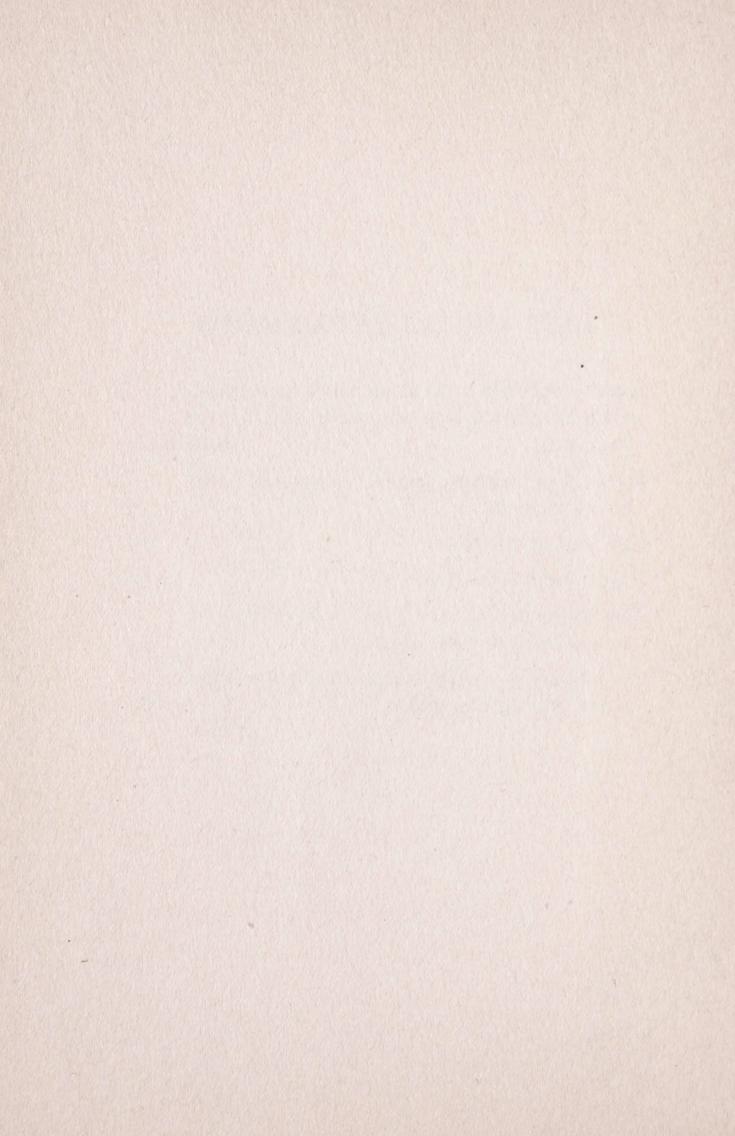
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THE BOY SCOUTS AT CAMP LOWELL

CHAPTER I

THE MARK OF THE WOLF

"Why shouldn't I eat?" retorted Harve Foster without the hoped-for show of heat. "My mother and my father like me, and the more I consume, the more there is of me. My life is spent in doing kindnesses for others."

"You bet!" chuckled Nelse Pease. "You've cherished so many tender thoughts for the corner grocer that he's building an addition. Wonder you haven't tried to swallow old Hec."

Foster rolled over on one side and tossed a bit of his doughnut to the cock-eared pup. "Um!" he speculated. "No, it's most dinner time and it might take the edge off my appetite. Is any one

but me grieving because school's over to-morrow?"

"Guess I'm shedding the same sort of tears, Fat," confessed Stan Wood, snuggling his spine more comfortably into the Lowells' lawn. "Anyway, none of us have got to make up anything this summer." He smiled luxuriously as he recalled what he had had to do the previous year.

"Fine crowd we'd be if we'd flunked anything," snorted Ned Field.

"Betcher!" rumbled Harve.

"Thought solid geometry was going to get me for a while," sighed Joe Lowell. "Then I remembered Fat's head and worked propositions on that. Mr. Steve said it was a great idea."

Foster grunted. "If he said so, I won't beat you up," he agreed. "Say, so long's we've all passed everything, don't you suppose we could get him to spend part of his vacation with us up at the camp?"

"Wish we could."

"Gee! But that would be the real thing."

"Nothin' doin'!" declared Joe, sitting up, his face sober. "The Mayhews have done enough for the Wolf Patrol without our asking any reward for doing what the Old Boss only suggested would be a fine thing. Every one of us was mighty glad to study hard because he hinted he'd like us to:"

"You bet!"

"Can't do enough for the old king!"

"Or Mr. Steve, either."

"Then why suggest Mr. Steve waste his first vacation in three years on us?" snapped Joe impatiently.

"'Cause we all want him, I suppose," confessed Harve. "Don't get all het up about it, Joey."

"I'm not. I'd like him up there with us just as much as the rest of you would. But I know he's been planning to go to the seashore, and no Wolf is going to breathe we want him to do anything else. It would be just like him to give up his own fun for ours."

"I was just dreamin' pleasant dreams," expostulated Foster. "What's bitten you, anyway? For two days you've acted like you'd been underfed. Why don't you go eat some grass like Hec does when he gets a peeve?"

Joe frowned. There was a note in Harvey's voice which made him uncomfortable, and he would have done almost anything before he would have hurt Harve. Not only were they both Wolves, but they had been through much together. "You eat the hole in that doughnut and choke to death, Fat," he ordered. "I've as much peeve as you've sense, and that's none at all."

"Apology's accepted," agreed Harve promptly.

"If I'd had any sense I'd have gone home to dinner half an hour ago. Any of you seen Dick Hunt lately?"

There was an unconscious stiffening in the attitude of the whole Patrol. It was evident that Harvey Foster had broached a subject in which there was no ground for banter. "Yes," acknowledged Joe, "I have."

"What'd he say?" It was the first time little Tug Wilson had spoken but the matter meant so much to him he could no longer keep still.

"'Bout the same old line of talk," confessed Joe. "Says he isn't going to queer us by hanging himself around our necks."

"He gives me the pip," exploded Nelse. "Anybody'd think we didn't know what we were doing."

"Guess I can see Hunt's side," Joe said slowly. "The whole town knew how deep he was mixed in that Stone affair and he knows that everybody knows. It was all Mr. Nelson could do to make him believe the bank was more than willing to give him another chance. He wanted to get out of Gillfield. It took the Old Boss himself to make Hunt realize his only chance was to stay here and live the thing down. Hunt can't see it would be a heap easier for him if he made some friends instead of trying to make the fight alone. I've talked to him till my throat ached, told him we wanted him to join the Wolves, told him not one of us had a thing against him now, but all he'll say is 'Wait.'"

"We've existed five years without him," growled Alex Cotton.

"But we voted to take him into the Patrol a year ago," argued Joe.

"There're about twenty good guys in Gillfield who're crazy to be Wolves," grunted Alex. "Why force the one gink who doesn't want to?"

"Because the Wolf Patrol went on record as ready to help Dick Hunt," stated the leader, "and it's never quit anything it started."

"There's something in that," Alex admitted.

"It's one lovely mess!" declared Nelse. "The idea of the Wolf Patrol having to beg a fish to become a member!"

"I dunno but I can see it a little from Hunt's point of view," Joe said slowly. "He sure knows what it is to be in dutch and he's decent enough not to want the same thing to happen to any one else."

"Swell chance for any of us ever to get mixed up with the sort of birds he did," grunted Stan.

"Couldn't if we wanted to," added Fat. "War's over and all the Hun spies are busy eating soap and other fattening foods."

"I'll bet you'd be a spy if any one'd feed you soap," declared Field.

"No, no! It's slippery and untasty. Ever try it any sort of way?"

Field laughed. "Once," he admitted. "It makes your hands look awfully queer, Fatness. You'd never believe it unless you experiment. . . . Hello, what's gnawed Hec in the ambition?"

Tug was on his feet instantly. Ever since that day when Hec had saved his life, he moved when his dog did. That was one reason he was so thin. The next second both boy and pup gave tongue and raced toward the street. Mayhew cat again?" queried Fat languidly.

Before any could answer there came a deepthroated hail from beyond the white picket fence. At the sound of that voice the Wolves came to life. Even Harve Foster was running before he was upright. Stephen Mayhew did not utter that call unless he wanted the Patrol on the jump.

But, as they went over the fence, they saw who was with him, and unconsciously their speed slack-

ened. Dick Hunt, sensitive beyond belief, noted the check and the color left the thin face. But Mr. Steve kept a firm grip on the slender arm, and the next instant the pack had surrounded them.

"Hello, fellows!" the man exclaimed, his smile showing how glad he was to see them all. "Got some real news for you."

"Let's have it, sir."

"That's what I called you for," he laughed. "Stopped at the bank on my way to luncheon and caught Mr. Nelson in the act of telling this chap here how pleased they were with him and his work, and that they were going to prove it by promoting him."

"Whew!"

Joe Lowell held out his hand. "That's fine, Dick!" he said heartily. "Every one of us is tickled to death that you've gotten what you deserve."

Hunt's face twitched. He had been afraid of something like this when Mr. Steve captured him and carried him off. Only now the friendly handshakes and slaps on the back were not half so bad as

he had feared. In fact, there was something decidedly pleasant about it all. "Thanks," he managed to say.

Stephen Mayhew realized that the time to make a dent in iron is when it is hot. And he had been watching this iron heat for some time. "Dick has earned it," he stated, "but it's really all in the day's work. What appeals to me most about the whole affair is the possibility of getting a regular banker into the Patrol so's he can act as treasurer."

"Say!" burst out Nelse Pease. "That's the best little idea ever hatched. I've got my accounts in such lovely shape it'd take two whole treasurers six weeks to find out why I've got more cash in the bank than on my book. I resign."

"'S long's there's more cash than figures, seems wise to accept Nelse's great personal sacrifice in time," laughed Mr. Steve. "Do you accept the job, Dick?"

"But I'm not a Wolf, sir."

Joe Lowell, who had led the Patrol for five years under Stephen Mayhew's guidance, was too well versed in his methods not to play up now. "What time does the bank close, Dick?" he asked.

"I get out at four."

"Meet us here at four-thirty and that Wolf matter will be fixed up pronto. We've got to have a Patrol meeting this afternoon to finish our plans for camp, and you'll be keeping books at five-thirty and wishing Nelse knew how to make real figures."

"What do you say, Dick?" It was Mr. Steve who asked.

The boy drew a long breath. Yesterday his answer would have been prompt. But to-day the man who had discovered his former troubles had proved them forgotten and forgiven by promoting him to a position of real trust. It had been the actual sign Dick had been waiting for. He had been so broken that, for a year, he had refused to allow himself to believe mere words. He now felt sure he had made good at his work; could he trust himself to make good with these boys who had played such an important part in exposing his error? He looked fearfully from one to another. He saw noth-

ing but the friendliest sort of grins. Something told him that they were as ready to accept him as Mr. Nelson had been to trust him, but again he experienced that same old fear of being unable to make good.

It was then that Hec thrust his cold muzzle into the cold hand. There was something so friendly and trustful about the act that Dick's courage rallied. "I'd like to join the Wolves," he faltered. "I'll try to play the game and be a good Scout."

"Yea!" Joe's voice rang high above the chorus. The anxious expression was gone from his face and his eyes danced. Mr. Steve had said everything would come out right if they would only have patience. It had been a big "if" but, once again, the Scout Master's wisdom was proved. The bright day seemed brighter, the sun appeared to shine more gloriously, Hec's tail had never wagged so triumphantly. "Now I'll go eat," declared Harve Foster.

There was a howl of laughter, but Fat merely grinned. He had quite as much sense as appetite

and his characteristic declaration had done the very thing he intended—prevented what would have become a trying moment for Dick Hunt as well as for the Wolf Patrol. And Dick, having at last found the courage to take the step they had all tried so long to make him take, was to be given no opportunity to reconsider it during a moment of embarrassment. At least that is the way Harve should have reasoned it out. What did flash through his mind was "Say, that gink's rattled an' I'll beat it before it gets catching."

The majority were only too willing to follow his lead and leave the details to Joe. Tug lingered, for it always took more than the first clang of the dinner bell to pry him from the leader of the Patrol.

Hec, ever hopeful of finding his old enemy, the Mayhew cat, tagged Dick, Joe, Mr. Steve, and his master, to the gate of the big place on the hill; and, while disappointed in immediate results, wagged his stump of a tail in rythmic approval of a conference which was sufficiently earnest to promise developments. For Hec had come to know

that, when the fellows he idolized ceased to fool and talked in quiet tones, things of interest happened in the immediate future. Nor was he really heart-broken when Mr. Steve refused to let him hunt the cat. When the group broke up, he followed Tug and Joe back down the street and finally went to sleep in the center of Mr. Wilson's pansy bed.

The eight who again gathered at the Lowell's that afternoon appeared anything but a disinterested lot. There was an atmosphere of suspense and anxiety which quieted even the talkative Pease. Dick Hunt had said he would come. But would his courage still hold? It was a question they asked themselves, but not each other. They had waited so long to carry out their promise to Mr. Nelson to make the boy a Wolf that, now that its fulfillment seemed at hand, it seemed almost too good to be true. The strange part of the whole affair was that not one of them really cared a snap about Dick. They were Scouts, ready and willing to do the best sort of Scout work, but every one of them would have preferred to have carried out that work

with some boy who had not been mixed up with a Hun plot. And Dick knew this. It was one of the two reasons why he had held back so long.

Four o'clock came and dragged its slow way into the past. A dozen times Harve wished he had not worn his new wrist watch in swimming. Joe finally rebelled at telling him the time. Hec, on his haunches, stared at the anxious group so intently that Field, in desperation, threw his cap at him and was promptly informed by Tug at just which spot he "got off."

Hec, having retrieved the cap, was in the throes of worrying it to death when a quiet voice interrupted everything. Joe was on his feet in an instant. "Hello yourself, Dick!" he replied. "Thought you'd forgotten to come."

"Didn't know I was late."

"You're not," comforted Fat, treating himself to another glance at his jewelry. "Blamed if I know, though, whether it's ten-fifteen this morning or seven-twenty-seven last night."

"Guess we'll get a move on," Joe suggested.

"Generally have patrol meetings in somebody's house, Dick," he explained, as he walked to the boy. "The Troop meets in the hall over the bank but Mr. Nelson, the Scout Commissioner, has given the Wolves permission to do this in our own way. We haven't taken any one into the Patrol since Tug was a Tenderfoot, and that was when we were all Second Class Scouts. Ready, fellows?"

"We are."

"We have been."

"Then let's go!" He thrust his hand under Hunt's arm and started toward the gate, the rest at his heels. Dick's lips drew into a straight line. He hadn't the remotest idea what was going to happen, but his mind was made up to go through anything without a protest.

They had not gone two hundred yards before the howl of a motor horn brought them around on their heels. There was a second's silence, a yell. Up the hill came roaring that big, blue runabout in which Stephen Mayhew tore around Gillfield. It slid to a stop at the curb. "Hoped I'd catch you

chaps," he said. "Where are you taking the neophyte, and why haven't you got him shackled?"

There was an answering grin from the eight, but Dick's face was a study. To have Mr. Steve suggest such things was unexpected. Before he had time to gasp, Fat Foster chuckled. "He can't escape," he retorted. "Hec, the blood-hound, is ready to run him up a tree."

"Have you an ax to cut the tree down with?"
Mr. Steve's voice was sober.

"Everything is provided for, sir."

"All right, Joe. Need any help?"

There was a yell of delight. "You bet!" shouted Fat above the chorus. "Ditch old pop-and-smoke and come on."

"I'll run it into the garage instead. Be with you in a minute."

"Going up into the grove," Joe called after him. "Come on, Dick."

"Is—is Mr Steve really coming?"

"Is he!" Even Alex Cotton laughed. "Think he'd miss anything like this? Not in about two

thousand years! He had a tender heart before he went over-seas, but since he came out of the army—hard boiled? Oh, boy!"

They turned through the great stone gateway which guarded the Mayhew place and started up the drive with a confidence none of them would have dreamed of feeling a year ago. Now it was as if they were part owners. The Old Boss let them come and go as they chose. And they would as soon have dreamed of abusing his hospitality as they would have passed him without a salute. He was not only the author of most of their good fortune, but their friend. Even Hec, spying a maltese streak, cleared the flower bed as he started the pursuit.

"He'll kill it!" Dick's cry was one of real alarm.

"Not unless he's grown wings," laughed Nelse.

"Hec can run," indignantly declared the loyal
Tug.

"He'll be glad of it—if that cat ever gets tired of fooling him," was the comforting retort. "Hurry up."

Beyond the kitchen garden Hec rejoined the pro-

cession, with as much pride as if he had slain a zoo instead of having been told the truth by the Mayhew cook. Tug looked at him with loyal eyes. "Some dog!" he exclaimed.

"And some fox," chuckled Nelse. "He wouldn't hurt that cat on a bet. He licked Hixon's bull-pup for chasing it last week, Dick."

But Hunt merely nodded. His mind was busy with other things. He wondered what was going to happen to him. A moment later Stephen Mayhew came up. For some reason Dick began to feel a bit more at ease. If the Scouts had an initiation, it would be less trying, he thought, with the Scout Master in charge.

At the edge of the big grove, Lowell came to a halt. "Please," he commanded sharply, "remain here with the candidate. When I whistle, blindfold him; when I whistle the second time, conduct him to the lair of the Wolves."

"Yes, sir." Nelson's hand snapped to salute but his blue eyes danced.

"Forward, Wolf Patrol!"

Dick hesitated, then set his teeth. Nelse was the one he dreaded most. But he had promised himself he would play the game. It seemed ages before a shrill whistle broke the silence and a handkerchief was bound over his eyes; longer ages before the second signal came and he felt a hand on his arm and began to advance.

Pease made no effort to confuse him by turning him around and around, and Dick realized he was being led into the heart of the grove. He began to feel more confident. This ceremony was to be dignified. If not, he believed his troubles would have begun already. "Halt!" came the sharp command.

He was brought to an abrupt stop. "A Wolf approaches with an unknown animal," announced a voice at his side.

"Advance, Wolf! The Pack is in council. Was the hunting good?"

"The hunting was not good. The animal is all bone above the neck."

"Hideous! Produce the animal."

"Animal," ordered Nelse, "advance." He pushed

Hunt forward. Dick heard the crackle and snap of a fire, caught the clean, fresh odor of the smoke.

"Wolf," demanded a voice Hunt recognized as Joe's, "you have brought a Thing to the council fire. Why has the law of the Wolves been broken."

"Answer, Beast!" ordered Nelse.

"I dunno," mumbled Hunt.

"'He dunno,'" imitated Nelse.

"You brought it," declared Joe sharply; "explain."

"It looked a little like a Wolf, O Leader of the Pack! I thought we should investigate."

"Like a Wolf?" Joe's voice rang with disbelief.
"We will investigate. Remove its coat."

Pease obeyed. He did more. He rolled up both Dick's sleeves. "It's a cub," he announced; "a wolf cub, free from the mark of any pack. No; wait! There is a scar."

"It's—it's where I was vaccinated," faltered Dick.

"There was a heap of hog cholera round here last winter," drawled a voice which sounded like Fat's.

Dick felt inquisitive fingers on his arm. "He

looks healthy enough now," owned Nelse.

"Is he mentally sound?"

"I think not."

"We will test his brain first. Bring forth the magnifying glass."

Dick heard some one step close to him, felt something rest on his head. "There is no sign of brain, O Leader of the Pack!" announced a voice he thought to be Stan's.

"Test him."

"Are you a Boy Scout?"

"No, sir."

"No brain at all," was the instantaneous pronouncement.

"Give him one more chance," begged Nelse; "put the great question."

"It shall be put. Listen well, Animal, and answer; for upon that answer rests your fate: 'If a Boy Scout met a mince pie, which way would the Big Dipper point?'"

"To Harve Foster," declared Dick.

"Kill him!"

"Silence in the council! Are you a Wolf cub?"

"I don't know."

"If you don't, who does?"

"I don't know."

"Knew he didn't know anything," growled Harve. Turn him loose and let Hec catch a rabbit."

"Silence! Animal, would you like to be a Wolf cub?"

"I guess so."

"Don't you know so?"

"Yes."

"If the Pack would accept you, would you accept the laws of the Pack?"

"Yes."

"How do you know? You don't know them."

"I guess," declared the boy, "if they're good enough for you fellows, they're good enough for me."

"That's a good answer. You shall be accepted. You shall be given the mark of the Pack. But remember this, Animal, a Wolf is courageous. Advance to the fire."

Again Dick Hunt was led forward. When he was halted, he could feel the heat from the blazing sticks at his feet. "Is the Mark of the Pack prepared?"

"It is white hot," answered Cotton's voice.

"Animal, it is not too late. Shall the mark of the Wolf be seared upon your arm?"

Dick's teeth set. He wondered how badly Mr. Steve would let them hurt him. In his mind he could see Cotton lifting the branding iron from the glowing coals. "I want to be a Wolf," he said, through tight lips; "go ahead."

"Throw that pail of water on him when he faints," ordered Joe. "Ready, Alex! Just above the elbow. Now!"

Dick stiffened suddenly. Something seemed to be eating into his arm and searching for the bone. He thought he could smell the odor of searing flesh as the pain shot through his whole body. His teeth clinched until they hurt. The brand pressed in. He swayed, his head went back. A full bucket of water splashed over him.

There was a yell, when the bandage was torn from his eyes, the light made him blink. His only thought was for his aching arm, and he turned his head to look. There came a chorus of yells, whoops, shouts of delight. For an instant he stood there, aghast, dripping, white, bewildered. His eyes rose from his arm to Alex Cotton's purple face, then fell to his arm again. Instead of a white and spluttering iron in an agonizing sore, there was pressed against his skin a bit of ice.

"Cub," gasped Joe Lowell, holding, out his hand, "you have answered the questions and stood the test. Welcome to the Pack."

Dick took the offered hand, a foolish grin spreading over his face. "I didn't know Scouting was like this," he confessed.

"Scouting isn't," declared Joe. "This is just what we call the Pack. The Troop meets this evening; the Wolf Patrol is a part of that. You'll be made a Tenderfoot to-night. You're Wolf material, all right, all right. Fellows, shake hands with the Wolf cub."

For a moment they crowded around, slapping him on the back, laughing, joking. It was when Mr. Steve came up that Dick's smile faded. There was a look in the blue eyes which made him catch his breath.

"I'm glad you are going to be in our Patrol, Dick," he said. "I think you're our kind; I think we are yours. You're game and a Scout is game. You've met things four-square and asked no favors. That is the Scout way. You've tried to know yourself. A Scout does that. You've stood on your own feet and fought your battle bravely. That is what every Scout tries to do. Scouting can teach much more, will do both. But you must help us by helping yourself. We are your friends; you are ours. You are a Wolf. Run with the Pack and run true and straight and good luck to you, old chap."

CHAPTER II

A JOB FOR A CUB

DICK found the meeting of the Troop that evening a far different affair from the gathering of the hilarious Pack. The grave and whole-hearted way in which the fellows repeated the Scout oath, the snap and formality of the Salute to the Flag, the sober and thoughtful reading of the Scout Law, made him the more eager to be received into the organization. And when he at length stood forth a Tenderfoot, two thoughts were uppermost in his mind: he would be the sort of Scout Mr. Steve hoped he would be, and he would be a Tenderfoot not a day longer than regulations required.

As he went home, he experienced something he had not known for two years. He wanted to be with the other fellows again, to get out of the bank and into a ball game; to have some one pound him

on the back and call him a "lobster" and to grin broadly while retorting. It was the first time he had realized what it had meant to have been without friends, even without companions. He wondered if the Wolves had really meant all they had said. He couldn't see how that was possible.

Among the lesser things he was thankful for was that the schools closed on the morrow. The Wolves would be free for the rest of the summer. His work would let him be with them after four each afternoon and half of Saturday. Life was gladsome again and Dick Hunt went into the house whistling. He had not done such a thing in many months.

The next morning he was given another surprise. Mr. Nelson, on his way to his desk in the bank, nodded. "Glad you're one of us, old fellow," he said cordially. "There're about twenty chaps in Gillfield who would give up a vacation to be in your place. A Wolf's quite an animal in these parts."

Dick flushed. "I know who I owe it all to," he

blurted. "I can never repay all you've done for me."

Mr. Nelson stopped short, then came back. "You don't owe it to me, Dick," he said, "and you must get such ideas out of your head. Those fellows are Scouts, just as you are, and they do things on their own initiative. They're the ones you have to repay, but there is only one way of doing it. That," he added gravely, "is by making good as a Wolf."

"I will," declared the boy.

"I think you will." He hesitated a moment. "When do you want your vacation?"

"Whenever it's convenient. I'm not going anywhere."

"Oh! I thought you'd want to go to Camp Lowell." He looked at Dick's blank face, then began to laugh. "Had you forgotten that?"

"I'd never even thought of it, sir. I never thought I could go up there. Why—why—" He gulped and his face turned from white to red.

"I'd think about it now," advised the Scout Commissioner.

Dick Hunt watched him walk away, the broad shoulders shaking with delight over his little joke. But there was no humor in it for the boy, only a sudden leaping of the heart and a thrill of anticipation such as he had never felt before. But, all at once, his head bowed and things grew dim. He remembered that it was he who had made Camp Lowell possible; not in the way Joe and Tug Wilson had done, but because it was his blindness and fear which had given them their chance to solve the Stone plot and win the reward and friendship of old Boss Mayhew. How could he go where everything would recall his misfortune? How could the fellows forget, even if they had appeared ready to forgive? How could he dull his own sharp memory?

The figures on the big book swam before his eyes. He was sorry he had given in to Mr. Steve, sorry he had believed himself strong enough to meet the fellows four-square. But then came remembrance of their welcome, their rollicking teasing, their friendly parting. He could still feel the

grip of Joe Lowell's hand; the thought of the council fire and his unscarred arm. But that arm bore a scar, invisible but full of meaning. And still heavier was the meaning of the promises he had made the night before. He had given his word he would be brave and true and loyal. He had been told that Scouts played the game. He was a Scout. The brown head came up and the dull eyes grew bright. He had made one fight alone; he knew the one to come would be backed by the strength of the Wolf Patrol.

For a year he had left the bank in the afternoon to hurry to the library, where he read until supper time. He had always loved books and they had repaid him in knowledge as well as in an excuse for avoiding the fellows. Yet, it must be confessed, that the boys had ably seconded the last part of his program. To-day he hardly knew what to do when his work was done. There was an article he wanted to finish, but there was a new desire which was even stronger. He wanted to hear Nelse Pease rag Fatty Foster. He almost thought he

might leave the library early and stroll home by way of the hill and the Lowell place.

But, for the first time in months, his plans went wrong. As he came out of the bank, three languid figures strolled out of the drug store across the street. "Oh!" exclaimed one of them, as if in vast surprise. "Behold Mr. Rockerbilt leaving his private treasury and awaiting his tame automobubble."

Dick grinned. "Hello, Nelse!" he called.

"Greetings, little one! Did they keep you after school, or do you hate to tear yourself from the dear old job?"

"Cash didn't balance the first time," explained Dick, as he joined them.

"Must have been my Patrol account," admitted the careful Pease. "Have you met my friend Mr. Foster. Also Mr. Lowell."

"I'm no friend of yours, Nelse," declared Fat.

"You bet your life you're not," Nelse agreed.

"Any prune who can absorb two more sodas than I can isn't a friend, he's a curiosity."

"I think we ought to stuff him," grinned Joe.

"What with?" snorted Nelse. "You couldn't insert a sheet of tissue paper into his pantry this minute."

"Is that so!" cried Fat. "You make a record by treating and I'll show you. I'll drink two more—if you'll pay for 'em."

"I've even less cash than curiosity," grinned Nelse. "Come on, or the rest of the crowd'll think we're dead."

"Where are you going?" Dick would have left the question unuttered had it not been for that joyous "we."

"Away from here, I'm afraid," sighed Fat. "Nelse'd see me die of thirst before he'd loosen."

"That's no dream."

"I'll set 'em up." Dick's offer was hesitating. He was not quite sure how they would take an invitation from him.

"Fine!" Harve's voice was hearty and he started for the store.

"Come back here," ordered Joe. "You couldn't swallow another."

"But I could look lovingly on Dick's little gift, Joe. I'd try to absorb it. I'm always polite."

"We haven't time. And, if you did bust, it would spoil everything for a couple of days."

"All you want to do is save my life now so you can work me to death next week up at that old shack," wailed Harve, throwing a big arm across Lowell's shoulder. "Some other day, Dick," he promised. "Save your pennies and I'll do the rest."

"But I'd really like to. I haven't had a soda for ages."

"Come on then." Harve turned promptly and led the way into the store. "Joe'll have lemon," he said. "Honestly, Nelse and I couldn't do anything with another except flood our ears."

Three minutes later and they were again on their way up the street. Dick knew he had never spent a quarter which had given him so much fun. The library was forgotten. All he could think of was his good fortune in meeting the fellows just as he came from work. He did not dream that they had been waiting for him half an hour, nor did they

intend he should. That was not the way of the Wolves.

When they finally strolled into the Lowells' yard it was to find the rest of the Pack under an apple tree and extremely busy doing nothing at all. "Where'd you catch that lobster?" demanded Stan, waving his hand toward Hunt.

Dick needed only Alex's cuff on his head to make him know the world was all sunshine. Life had never been like this. He dug his toe into the turf and tried not to grin with his ears. "I may be a lobster," he admitted, "but I want to go on record right here as having no intention of being a crab."

"Don't boast," grunted Ned Field. "We're not interested in your future. Have you done your daily good deed?"

"He offered to buy me a soda," announced Harve.

"That wasn't any good deed; it was throwing good money away."

"But I couldn't drink it," mourned Fat.

"Then you've got it in your handkerchief," com-

forted Ned. "You may be able to stuff yourself but you can't stuff me, Joe," he declared, turning to the Patrol leader. "We've been trying to line things up, but we've got to get busy, if we're really going to get up to camp to-morrow. Let's quit fooling and get on the job."

"Suits me."

"All right; start something."

"Suppose you tell us what you've already decided."
Joe threw himself on the ground and looked from one to the other. If Dick expected any special invitation to do anything in particular at that moment, he was disappointed. He was a Wolf. His rights were the same as theirs. They intended to have him understand that.

He wavered for a second, undecided what to do. Then instinct, or modesty, or something or other, bade him do the right thing. He sat down beside Tug and began to imitate a vast silence.

"We're going to start for Camp Lowell to-morrow morning."

"We decided that about six months ago," growled Harve; "get somewhere."

"I'm beginning at the beginning," retorted Ned haughtily. "I—"

"I've just finished a lovely course in ancient history," suggested Harve, "and I'm full up on the stuff. What do we take along in the way of sustenance?"

"We'll buy your hay when we get there," drawled Nick.

"Don't like breakfast foods; they just tease me.

I want a tame hen who'll lay me two nice, fresh
eggs every morn."

"All right. Put down one tame hen for the boaconstrictor, Alex. What do you think about hiking up, Joe?"

"Suits me. What do the rest think?"

They nodded approval. "But how about toting all our clothes and stuff?" queried the cautious Harve.

"I saw Mr. Steve this noon," Joe announced. "Every fellow's pack is to be on our piazza at ten

o'clock. He's to send it all up to camp in their little truck."

"Good man!"

"That's the sort of Scout Master to have."

"Wouldn't Mr. Steve think of just that?"

Only Foster looked glum and shook his head. "I thought so," he sighed. "I never knew a trout brook that didn't have a sucker in it. Some one's got to guard that luggage and ride up with it. Don't bother to tell me I'm the goat. But I'll do it. I'll sacrifice myself and my pleasure for your welfare. I'm unselfish. I'll ride."

Even Dick howled. "Will all the rest of you be ready to start at eight?" Joe asked.

"Sure!"

"You'll have to have your uniform sent up, Dick,"
Joe explained. "We can fix you up till it comes.
You'll need a pair of blankets, underclothes and
stuff, some towels for swimming and—"

Dick's face was a study. They didn't invite him to go, merely took it for granted that he was going. He began to appreciate what it meant to be a Wolf.

"I got my Scout things this noon," he stammered. "But I can't go to Camp Lowell."

"What's that?"

"Say, where do you get that stuff?"

"Why not?" Joe's voice was sober.

"I have to work."

"Gee!" Joe exclaimed. "That's so. I forgot about that." He was silent a moment. "But you don't work Saturday afternoons and Sundays. You can come up Saturday noons and go back Mondays. And you get a vacation, don't you?"

"Couple of weeks."

"Fine and dandy! Alex has got to work during August. You can go and come together then. But, about to-morrow? You want to be there for the first night in camp."

"Easy enough," declared Harve. "Why don't you put the brain problems up to the thinking department? Get Mr. Steve to hold that truck till noon. Dick can bring up the luggage."

"Thought you wanted to ride," grinned Nick Reed.

"Do. But rather have ole Dick get up to camp. Maybe I need the exercise anyway. I was lookin' at myself last night; I'm beginning to show faint traces of plumpness about the waist."

"Mean the head, don't you?" chuckled Joe. "Well, that's that and settled—if it's O. K. with you, Dick?"

"But will Mr. Mayhew think it's all right?"

"Oh, sure! He just suggested ten." Joe knew Mr. Steve would disarrange any plan to help the Patrol, and do so gladly, if it would start the Tenderfoot in the right way. "Now let's get down to real business. Alex, get out your book and we'll check up the supply list. No more fooling now, fellows. If we've overlooked anything, it's got to be ordered early in the morning and Dick will have to collect it. That will mean his losing just so much time and fun."

For half an hour they were actually serious. The lists of supplies were checked and rechecked as if they had been the offspring of the moment, rather than the outgrowth of months of care-

ful, thoughtful study. It was ten miles to Forest Lake and Camp Lowell, but one might have believed it a thousand from the care taken to omit nothing. Yet that was the Wolf way: they had learned the wisdom of being prepared. It was better to think now than regret later.

"I guess we've included about everything," declared Joe at last. "I've one suggestion to make, though. Ned's the commissary department, but I think it would be a good scheme to make Dick his assistant. He can do our shopping here and bring the stuff up with him Saturdays. It will save Ned the trip down."

Field nodded approval, but Pease had been too long quiet. "Going to buy him a wheel-barrow to push the stuff up in?" he snorted. "Or do you get a vision of him honking along the road with a trailer hitched to his belt? It would take four more donkeys to bring Fat's fodder."

"Get Mr. Steve to ship it up," suggested Stan languidly. "He's always game."

"I don't think we ought to ask him to do that."

Nelse sat up and looked vastly surprised. "Why, look who's here!" he exclaimed. "Our dear Tug has come to life."

"That's all right," declared the little fellow, "but I think exactly that."

"Having taken about an hour to say something," agreed Nelse. "I'll say it's a mature thought. Does Hec second your motion?"

"I believe Tug's dead right," stated Joe. "Mr. Steve would do anything for us, but let's do a few things for ourselves. Why not leave this transportation stuff up to Ned and Dick?"

"Fine!" agreed Nelse. "That's exactly the way I believe in doing things ourselves. What do you think about it, Ned?"

Field grinned amiably. "Knew I'd end up as the goat somehow," he said, "but I'm game. We're only too glad to do our share. Dick, you're the town end of the commissary. I'll tell you what we want at camp; you buy it and get it there."

There came a general gasp, then a roar. Pease might be an expert at avoiding things, but he was

an amateur at "passing the buck" when compared with Field. Dick did not know this, however. It was one of the many little characteristics he had yet to learn. All that he grasped was that they had asked him to do something for them. "I'll do the best I can, of course," he agreed soberly.

Ned Field's jaw dropped. For once he had been fooling. Camp Lowell was as dear to him as to the rest and he intended to do his full part. But now he had an inspiration. "That's settled, then," he stated. "You fellows forget it; it's going to be a good job well done. I've got to be moving. Come on, Dick."

The Tenderfoot rose. "It's mighty nice of you all to give me this job," he said, his thin cheeks flushed. "I—appreciate it."

"Say!" gasped Nelse, a moment later. "That chap's either one easy mark or a corker. Joe, the ole bean was on the job when you made us take him into the Patrol."

"You've burbled a fact," agreed Nick.

"Maybe you're both right," said Harve, "but I'm going to save my bouquets until I see how the grub comes through. It's a big job for a Tenderfoot." "Feeding you? I'll say so!"

CHAPTER III

HANSON HOLDS THE ROAD

Tug Wilson did not sleep much that night. No Wolf had begun to anticipate the summer in camp at Forest Lake so vividly. He considered himself the least important member of the Patrol, never giving a thought to the Medal of Honor he had won and not in the least comprehending that none of the rest would have thought of going without him. Now he could hardly believe that the time to start was almost in sight on the clock.

He was up with the sun and his pack ready long before breakfast. A dozen times he had checked the list of things he was to take. He could think of no single thing he had omitted. Unable to imagine anything else in the way of preparedness, he had led the mystified Hec to the back porch and treated him to an early morning bath. Which

same was not Hec's idea of the beginning of a perfect day.

Tug, his bulging pack and his laundered pup, appeared at the Lowells' gate fifty-seven minutes before the zero hour. The boy perched on the fence and whistled; the dog rolled in the dust until he again began to feel natural.

Finally the rest arrived. The packs were piled and left ready for Dick Hunt to pick up. Lowell looked over his followers. "All aboard!" he called. "Good-by, Mother; come up soon." And with a wave of his hand to the smiling Mrs. Lowell, he led the way into the street. "My!" exclaimed Tug. "Doesn't seem true, does it?"

"What doesn't?"

"That we're really going, Nick."

"Reckon we'll think it's true enough in about an hour. Some little hike, ole top!"

Lowell and Foster, at the head of the Patrol, had that same idea. Old at the game, they had no intention of giving Gillfield the impression they were tireless walkers by starting out at a rattling pace. A slow, steady, swinging heel and toe, with frequent halts for rest, would be what would get them to the lake in fit condition. Joe whistled between his teeth as they went down the hill. Fat's eyes, for once, were serious.

"Good-by, you fellows," called a voice from behind a white cottage.

Joe turned, then swung his arm. "So long, Bill!" he answered. "Come up and see a real camp some day."

"Mean that?"

"Surest thing ever!"

"That go for the rest of us?"

Joe stopped. "Betcher!" he agreed. "We Wolves are always glad to have the Fox Patrol around."

Bill Long meandered down to the hedge with characteristic laziness. "Got a place to play ball up there?"

"Good enough one to teach your outfit the game on," grinned Alex.

"We'd sorter like to learn it," drawled Bill. "Course, Joe," he added, "we aren't trying to horn

in on your party, but we do enjoy licking you Wolves about once in so often."

"How do you know that?" demanded Nick.

"We did at hockey."

"That's no dream," promptly admitted Nick; "good and plenty, too. But right here you get your bluff called about your almost nine. You set a date."

"Rather have you chaps do that—if you really want us."

"We'll send you word next week," stated Joe; "we've got to get settled. Why couldn't the Foxes come up, play us and then stay to supper?"

"Do you really mean that?" Bill showed real excitement.

"Wouldn't have suggested it, if we hadn't."

"You're on!" promised the leader of the Fox Patrol. "You ring the bell any old time and we'll answer 'Here."

"That's that," stated Joe. "We've got to be on our way. Thanks, Bill."

"Any little presents in the way of thanks are

headed your way. Next to the Foxes, you're the best out! And say Harve, don't eat all the huckleberries before we get there."

Fat grinned over his shoulder. "Leave one apiece for you," he promised.

"Never thought of having a camp nine," Alex offered as they swung down the hill.

"Probably because we only had eight chaps before we got Dick," suggested Nelse. "Wonder if he can play."

"Wasn't so much of a much when he was in the grammar school," admitted the pitcher sorrowfully.

"He'll try, anyway," declared Ned. "I'll say that chap's out to keep his best foot way in front of him."

"Hi, there! Who gave you fellows a permit to have a parade?"

The demand was made in a deep, booming voice. The next instant there was an answering yell of delight. "Three cheers for Officer Donovan."

The policeman grinned. "Goin' to jump the town, are you?" he chuckled. "Good thing. Better

spend the summer on the lake than in jail. I'd have landed some of you, sure, if you'd have stuck round."

"Coming up to see us?"

"Not 'less the farmers call for help."

"We'll make 'em—if that'll bring you," promised Nick.

"Don't doubt you'll try, son. Well, so long! Have a good time." He nodded jovially and resumed his beat, wishing the Scouts had come to Gillfield twenty years sooner.

A dozen other men had called friendly good-bys before they were free of the town. If more had been needed to make them believe it was the start of the best vacation ever, they could not have imagined that need. The fine part of the whole thing was that they took their popularity merely as a matter of kindly interest on the part of the town. They were not the sort who, each morning, find their hats too small for their heads. Your true Scout never is.

The day was perfect for a hike, the sun not too hot, the breeze just strong enough. But while

they enjoyed every second of the morning, and every inch of the way, there was one member of the Patrol who found it hard to do his full duty. Bending over his books back there in the Gillfield bank, Dick Hunt's mind strayed from the columns of figures to the little column of singing boys on the open road. Time after time he had to grit his teeth and force himself back to the task in hand.

It was even harder when Mr. Steve came in to see Mr. Nelson on business. He wanted to talk to the handsome young Scout Master, to ask him a dozen questions, but Mr. Mayhew passed with only a friendly nod. Dick's surprise was the greater when, half an hour later, he became aware of some one at his elbow and, looking up, saw Mr. Steve smiling down at him.

"Good day to be out doors," he announced.
"Yes, sir."

"Fellows must be most up to the lake now, don't you think?"

Dick's smile only crinkled the corners of his

mouth. "That's the one thing I've been trying not to think about," he confessed.

"Rather guessed that. Well, old chap, I've some bad news for you. Can't let you have that truck at one o'clock." He saw the boy's face drop and did not have the heart to continue the game. "You've got to go now," he laughed. "Mr. Nelson says it's all right."

Dick was on his feet in a second. "Really?" Then, before Mr. Mayhew could answer, he plumped down again. "Give me five minutes," he begged; "I can do most of my work in that and leave only a little for some one else to do."

"Take ten, if you need them," came the hearty reply. "That's the proper spirit to show. I'm going back to the mill and I'll send Burke and the truck to the Lowells'."

"Fine! I'll get my own things on the way up there."

A firm hand fell on his shoulder for a moment. "May be up to-morrow," said Mr. Steve, and went out. Dick's five minutes grew to fifteen, but he made that up by the speed with which he dashed home for his pack and from there to the Lowells'. He was carrying the duffle from the porch to the curb when Burke arrived. "I'll toss 'em up to you, if you'll stow 'em," he offered.

"Ye're th' boss," grinned the big good-natured driver.

"You're the expert," laughed Dick. "I'd just pile things in a heap and smash most of the stuff."

"Then be after givin' me th' heavy stuff foirst," suggested Burke. "'Tis goin' to be wan load, Oi'm thinkin'."

Within five minutes Dick appreciated it was all that. He realized it was a hot day long before he climbed up beside Burke and the truck went joggling down the hill. He was glad Burke's whole attention was needed at the wheel, for his lungs seemed quite anxious for all his breath and he enjoyed the silence. But, as soon as they were in the country, Burke proved he had no especial desire to be selfish with his thoughts.

It was an enjoyable trip for Dick. He had not been so far from the town in months. There had been nothing to take him from his routine of home, bank, and library and already he was beginning to wonder what had possessed him. He might have crept out of his shell just as safely six months ago and he had lost much by not doing so. He thought of this, and many similar things, as they rolled toward the foot-hills but, while this was in the back of his mind, he still managed to listen to Burke.

"Th' Ould Boss was generous in givin' ye bhoys th' camp," the man declared, as they began to climb the first of the hills, "but he was after bein' some generous to himself as well, Oi'm tellin' ye. He do be glad to have ye all watchin' Hanson fur him."

"Who's Hanson?"

"Hanson? Ain't, ye ever heard tell o' Hanson?"

"Never even heard his name."

"Th' Ould Boss'd like yer luck," chuckled Burke.

"He do be able to get along peaceful like wid most anythin' what walks on two feet, but ever since Hanson got th' farm forenenst th' Mayhew holdin's, he's been after tryin' to row wid th' Boss."

"Didn't suppose a white man could row with a Mayhew," observed Dick.

"An' who be sayin' Hanson was after bein' white?" demanded Burke. "Ask th' neighbors up to th' lake; they knows his color. He's fit most o' 'em. Ye bhoys want to lave him be, do ye be wantin' pleasure out o' yer camp. He's pizen an' then some."

Dick was thoughtful for a moment. "It takes two to make a row," he said at last, "and I don't believe any fellow in the Wolf Patrol is going to help along any trouble. We'd rather be friendly with every one."

"Hav' ut yer own way," grunted Burke, in frank disgust. "'Tis none o' my affair."

"I didn't mean it that way at all," Dick declared quickly. "I certainly do appreciate your tip and

so will the fellows. But, you see, we all try to help people and we all want to do a good deed every day. I sorter thought we might be able to do a lot of good deeds by trying to be so decent to this man Hanson that he would not want to be disagreeable."

"If ye want to do a good deed," rumbled Burke, "kill Hanson. That 'ud be somethin' ye could be after getting a medal for."

Dick had to laugh. He saw there was no use arguing with Burke. "Let's forget Hanson," he suggested, "and let's hope we fellows won't get into any messes up here."

Burke, who had a vivid memory of Dick's own particular "mess," looked at him out of the corner of his eyes. "Oi'm wid ye on that," he stated, "an' Oi'm after thinkin' nothin' much 'ull happen to ye unless wan or two of ye get drownded an' et up by th' bullheads."

"That's a cheerful thought. How much further is it?"

"Ain't ye been up to Camp Lowell?" There

was honest astonishment in the question.

Dick shook his head. "They've only just taken
me into the Patrol," he confessed. "I haven't been
at the lake since the camp was built."

"'Tain't fur now." Burke shifted his gears as the grade stiffened into the final upward pitch. The truck rumbled up the uneven road which clung to the edge of a swirling brook overhung by woods. With a final roar of the exhaust, they won the summit and came out onto an open plateau. To the east rose the mountains, behind opened a glorious view, and far down the valley they could see the chimneys of the Mayhew plant. Ahead, they saw the gleam of Forest Lake set in its frame of tall, still pines; and here and there, prosperous looking farm houses which broke the monotony of the level fields. The speed of the truck increased, but not half enough to suit the desire of the boy. "We'll be after turnin' in beyant that big, red barn," announced the driver.

Dick was all eyes now. The half mile yet to be covered seemed by far the longest part of the journey. The lake had disappeared behind its shield of pines. He searched for signs of smoke above the trees. Surely the Wolves must have arrived and started dinner long before this.

He was so interested in his anticipations that he had not watched the road; so, when the truck came to a grinding stop, it startled him even more than Burke's low-growled "Begorra, he won't be after lettin' ye ferget him!"

Dick looked ahead and saw a pair of horses, hitched to a farm wagon, standing in the center of the narrow road. "Move over!" called Burke; "gimme half th' road."

The lean, weasel-faced farmer on the seat shifted a straw further into the corner of his thin lipped mouth. "You folks ain't goin' to run everythin' up here," he announced. "Ye've got room enough; get by."

"Want to bog me in that ditch, do ye? Think ye'll get th' Ould Boss to give ye a couple o' dollars fur haulin' me out, do ye? Well, ye've got wan more guess," roared Burke. "Oi'll wait here as

long as ye will." And he promptly shut off his engine and reached for his pipe.

"You've scart my hosses," yelled the farmer, giving a vicious jerk on the reins and making the skinny off horse rear half-heartedly.

"Nothin' doin', Hanson!" stated Burke. "Engin's dead an' there ain't nothin' to scare yer bone-yard. Oi've met up wid ye afore. Git out o' th' way!"

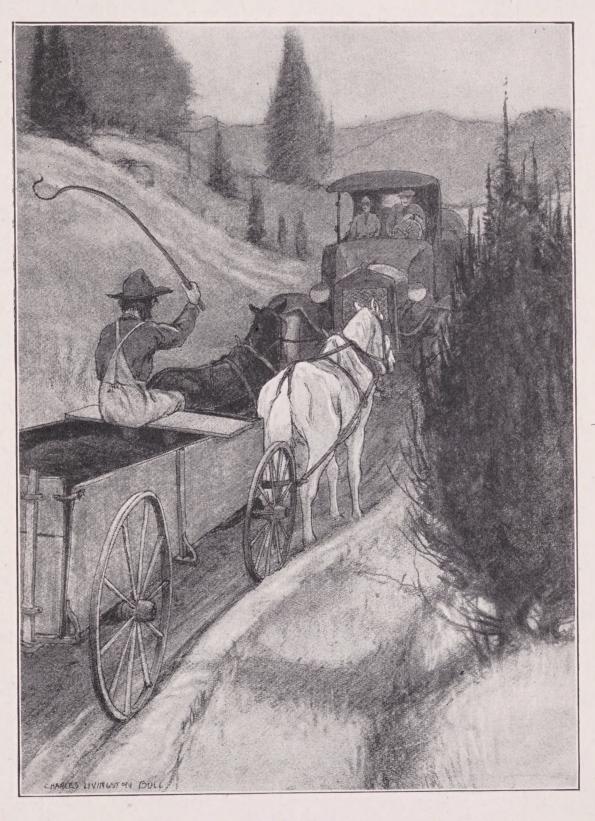
"I'm out of yer way."

"All right. Suit yerself. Oi've got till Monday mornin'," And he lit the pipe and set back in comfort. "Glad to make ye acquainted with Mister Hanson so pleasant, Dick. We'll be after sittin' him out, Oi'm thinkin'."

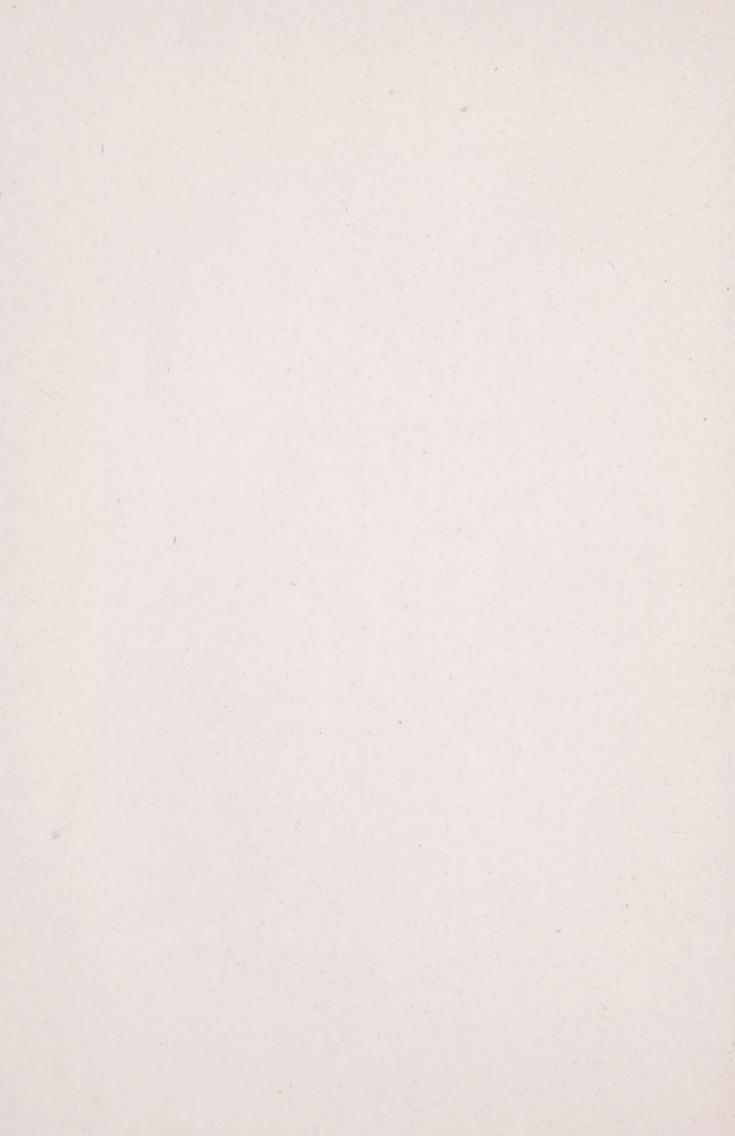
"He's certainly being disagreeable. I didn't know any farmer would refuse to give half the road nowadays."

"None o' th' white wans will. This bird's jest bein' natural. He'll begin to squawk in wan minute."

It proved good prophecy. Hanson squawked,



"HANSON SQUAWKED, RAGED, VOWED ALL SORTS OF VENGEANCE"



raged, vowed all sorts of vengeance, claimed many kinds of damages, and threatened many kinds of suits against the Mayhews; but Burke merely smoked in silence as he studied the peaceful mountains. At last the farmer, appreciating that he was fighting a losing battle, changed his tactics. "One o' ye lead me horses an' I'll move over," he offered. "They're skeered an' I'm takin' an awful chance o' gettin' smashed. But I ain't no roadhog, nohow."

"No," growled Burke, "ye're a herd of 'em. Be after leadin' yer own hosses. They're too near dead to be skeered o' anythin' but a bag o' oats."

But Dick was on the ground before Burke had finished speaking. He knew enough about Scouting to know it was a Scout's duty to help others and to do, what seemed to him, a kindly act. If, by pretending to lead these weary old horses half way out of the road, he could "save Hanson's face," he could see no harm in making the attempt; and much good might result in proving to the man that

the Wolves were ready to go out of their way to play the game with him.

"Don't touch them skates!" warned Burke.
"He's up to somethin'."

"Take th' nigh one gentle-like," ordered Hanson whiningly. "I'll start 'em; you hold 'em if they try to run."

"All right." Dick reached for the bridle and patted the weary head. "Come on," he ordered, and started to lead them.

But even as he took the first step, Hanson gave a savage tug at the rein and cut the off horse viciously with the whip. The pair jumped. The boy was almost thrown from his feet. The rickety wagon went careening into the ditch. Hanson, livid with pretended rage, leaped to the ground, whip in hand.

"Ye will ditch me!" he screamed. "Ye will smash my wagon an' abuse my hosses. I've stood enough Mayhew dirty work an' I'll teach you now."

But, before he could advance a step, the truck's

motor came to life and Burke threw in his gears. Hanson caught one glimpse of the face above the steering wheel as the machine came down on him. He knew it was either jump or go down. He jumped.

Tricked for the moment, he had no intention of taking such a thing supinely. He was back in the road again almost as soon as the truck had passed the tail of his wagon. The fact that his supposedly frightened horses were greedily cropping bushes in the ditch did not bother him at all. Great damage had been done. He made a swing at Dick with his whip.

The boy, startled by the suddenness of the whole affair, had not moved. But the sting of the lash around his calves made him jump and utter a cry of surprise. He saw the whip curl back again but leaped out of range. "What are you trying to do?" he yelled. "Quit it!"

But Burke was out of the truck by now, the fighting light sparkling in his eyes, a heavy wrench in his hand. "Hit that bhoy agin an' Oi'll bite

dirt wid ye, Hanson," he yelled. "Oi'll hang yer skunk hide on th' fence, if ye so much as moive."

"I'll have ye arrested for assault," threatened Hanson, "assault with intent to kill. An' I'll have the boy arrested for wreckin' my team."

"All ye'll do is get measured by th' undertaker," retorted Burke.

"Let him alone," begged Dick; "we're past him and we don't want any trouble with him; you said so yourself."

"Oi've changed me moind. Oi want wan heap o' trouble with him an' me monkey wrench right now an' here."

"If you hit him, he can have you arrested; he hasn't touched you."

"An' I'll do it," promised the crafty Hanson, quick to see a loophole for escape.

Burke paused to scratch his ear. "Ye would do that," he admitted; "ye're that yaller mean. But the bhoy can have ye pinched fur hittin' him wid th' whip."

"He ditched my team first. He laid hands on my property."

"Ye told him to."

"I did not. I told him not to touch me hosses."

Dick gasped. It, was such a crude lie he was aghast.

"Ye are together," proclaimed Hanson. "Ye blocked th' road an' wouldn't let me pass. Ye got out, one o' ye, an' ditched my team. It's my word agin yourn an' every one knows th' Mayhews have been tryin' to run me off th' mountain."

"Come on," growled Dick, utterly disgusted.

"Let's get out of this and forget it. He makes
me sick."

"Yea!" triumphed Hanson. "An' I'll make ye sicker before I'm done with ye, ye young smart Alec!"

CHAPTER IV

HEC BECOMES POPULAR

As they turned from the highway into the lane leading lakewards, Dick felt as if the sun had suddenly gone behind a cloud and a perfect day become gloomy and depressing. Above all things, he hated a row, and the experience with Hanson had been so unpleasant and so uncalled for that it left him numb. He could not grasp even the slightest of excuses for the man's action. Nothing but plain, unadultered meanness could have caused the farmer to have gone so far out of his way to make trouble. In this decision, the raging Burke was whole-heartedly and vociferously in accord.

When the truck pulled into the little clearing beside Camp Lowell, even the yells of delight which welcomed his arrival failed to lift Dick out of his discomfort. He had a vague, disturbing feeling that, in some wholly unpremeditated manner, he had hung a promise of disaster above all their heads. It made him feel as if he wanted to steal off and be by himself, in order to hate himself properly for being the innocent cause of inviting trouble to descend upon these fellows who had done so much to lift very real trouble from his weary shoulders.

That he was merely an excuse for Hanson's conduct did not occur to him. Had he not been at hand, the man would have found some other obscure reason for starting a row with a Mayhew man. The very name of Mayhew was to him as a red rag to a bull. That the Old Boss held him as beneath contempt only added to his insane rage.

Joe Lowell was quick to note that something had gone wrong, but he was far too wise to ask Dick any questions before the fellows. He did manage to get Burke off to one side for a moment, and from Burke's rumbling eruptions gathered a vague idea about what had occurred. And, having met Han-

son while the camp was being built, his face also became sober. He had no thought of blaming Dick; he had only regret that a fire, which he had hoped might have died out, had blazed up again.

"You're not out to bust any speed records, Harve," he called suddenly; "take time enough to stack these cans on the kitchen shelves."

"I'm throwin' 'em to Tug; he's inside doing the stacking."

"Oh! Then quit putting a drop on every pitch," grinned Joe. "Sounds like somebody breaking up housekeeping in there."

"And me, being the popular goat, gets roasted," mourned Fat. "Here she comes, Tuggy." And a couple of cans of soup flashed through the open window. "Wait till I get to the flour and I'll show you how you'll look as Santa Claus," he promised.

"You're the one who'll mind starving to death," suggested Joe. "Pick up your pack, Dick, and I'll show you your bunk and help you get settled."

Anxious to see the much talked of Camp Lowell

in its entirety, Hunt was quick to accept the invitation. Swinging his blanket roll over his shoulder, he followed Joe onto the broad veranda overlooking the lake. Already a pair of hammocks were in place and several chairs were drawn near the rustic rail. It was certainly attractive, both for its comfort and because of the view across the water. But the boy was anxious to see what the little building was like inside.

When the elder Mayhew had made the Wolves the envy of every Patrol within a hundred miles of Gillfield, he had done it in his customary sane way. There was nothing elaborate or luxurious about the place. It was comfortable, solid, convenient. The main building was, perhaps, thirty feet by twenty, clapboarded and with a well-pitched roof which slanted out to form the roof of the veranda. It contained but one big room, used as a dining, lounging and sleeping place. A big table, roughly built, stood in the center, while a cobbled fireplace was at one end. The bunks were along the other end and on the rear wall, double-decked affairs, each

with a comfortable mattress. In the rear, a small ell contained the kitchen and store room. If other things were needed, or improvements desired, the Old Boss had said that they were "up to the Wolves," not to him. But not a Wolf could imagine the slightest addition to the equipment. Everything they could really need was there.

"Your bunk's the upper one in that corner," stated Joe, as they went in; "Alex' is under you and, if you snore, he'll probably kick at you till you think you're aeroplaning. Boots and things go under Alex' bunk; you share and share alike with that space. But everything must be kept shipshape. I inspect camp every morning and evening and whenever else I want to. If things don't look right to me, the fellow who is to blame gets an extra turn at dish washing. And there's no appeal from sentence, young-feller-me-lad."

"Who does the cooking?"

"Stan and Nick. Both of 'em are pretty good—sometimes. Milk, eggs and stuff we buy from the farmers, also bread and pies and cake and the other

real necessities. Most of these things come from Mrs. Bray and, believe me, Mr. and Mrs. Bray are regular people! Ned buys things from them and, whenever you're here, you'll have to help him, being assistant commissary."

"Suits me," agreed Dick promptly. "How's the rest of the work divided up? I want to do my full share while I'm here."

"Tug and Nelse take care of the boats and the yard around the camp. Alex and I get the wood. Harve does the sweeping and," chuckled Joe, "is sorter permanently on the dish-washing crew. Everybody's supposed to take his turn at that, though. Two fellows work at it at a time and it goes according to that schedule there on the door. When I assign a victim, the two regulars draw lots to see which of them escape. Reckon you'll get a turn about every other Sunday because your other work won't be heavy and you've got to do your share."

"Sure I have! Is there any fishing out there in the lake?"

"Plenty," grinned Joe; "whole lake full. Don't know how many fish there are, though. Fat says it's alive with bass but he hasn't been able to prove it."

"Didn't know he was a fisherman."

"You've nothing on the rest of us. Get anything to eat before you left Gillfield?"

"Ate my lunch on the way up."

"That'll make you popular with Stan. If you've all your things straightened out, let's get back to the gang and find out what they've got on their minds for this aft."

It did not take long to find that out. Hardly were they through the door before Alex Cotton stalked up, an unusually sober expression on his somber face. "You've let us in for this, Joe," he announced; "whatcher goin' to do about it?"

"Not having the least idea what you're raving about, I don't see how I'm going to give you the intelligent answer you've learned to expect from me."

"When you get intelligent," grunted Alex, "festoon your dome in lovely pink. You know what I mean. How about Bill Long and those Foxes?"

"Oh!" Joe grinned. "Why worry? I never could stay all het up over a false alarm."

"That crowd can play ball." There was no trace of levity about Cotton's statement. He was dealing with fact.

"So can we."

"Maybe some of us can," admitted Alex, "but there are some who'll never keep the bush league scouts from getting their sleep. You've asked the Foxes up to play ball, Joe, and we ought to get in some practice before they come."

"Then why waste all the afternoon in a oneman debate?" suggested Joe. "You're the committee on athletics; get on the job."

"That's what I wanted. Didn't know but you'd have something else on your mind. Say, Dick, are you any sort of a ball player?"

"Don't think so."

"That'll be fine!" grumbled Cotton. "With you and Tug and Fat in the outfield we'll at least have nine men."

Joe laughed. Old Alex had a habit of looking for the black side of every cloud. It was also characteristic in him to overlook the fact that his pitching was worth about six men to any nine which played behind him. "Don't let's be licked until after the game," Joe suggested. "I'm ready to run my head off and blister my hands for a couple of hours, if it'll make you any happier."

"Then come on. Hi, you fellows! Get your gloves and come up to the diamond for practice."

"I got a stone bruise running those bases a couple of weeks ago," complained Nelse, springing up from the pine needles, where he had been resting after his half hour's work. "Say, Harve, did you pick all the blackberries out in center field?"

"I did not. There's a hornet's nest there and any ball that drops within ten yards of it is good for seven bases, for all of me."

"Alex says you've got to practice."

"All right," Fat sighed, "I can't grow any more sunburn on my neck than I've got there now." He disappeared into the camp to return with a fielder's glove and a bat. "What I really need is a pair of pillows," he explained to Dick; "none of these heavy-weights have strength enough to hit a ball out into the mowing where we fielders trample the lovely wild flowers. Come along, old cotton battin'!"

In spite of his protest, he led the way along the shore, and then back along the edge of a corn field to an open pasture, the rest ambling along in their own good time. Dick, well to the rear, found himself beside Ned Field. "Alex will make us practice half an hour," explained that worthy, "then some one'll be able to start a game of numbers and we'll have some real fun. But," he sighed, "you and I'll have to quit the game just when it gets good, and start for the Bray farm for the stuff I've ordered."

"Tell me where it is and I'll go."

"The Wolves don't do things that way, old hoss.

You'll do your half of the work, all right, all right, but you'll only do your half."

Dick nodded. "All right. I'm to be here so little that I sorter feel I oughter do all I can while I am here. Say," he asked, after a moment, "don't the farmers kick about you fellows wandering all over this stuff?"

"Suppose they might, if we did. But we take mighty good care to keep out of any field we could hurt. We go out of our way to be decent to the people up here and, so far, they've paid us back by doing the same. This place ahead, where we play ball, just had its annual hair cut and Mr. Bray said we could do anything there we wanted to. He only cut the hay to give the sun a chance to ripen the rock crop."

Within ten minutes Dick had been made custodian of right field on the Wolf Patrol nine. "And the first thing you have to do," Nelse Pease added to Cotton's brief instructions, "is to tote six rocks from your position and pile 'em on that wall. It

helps Mr. Bray and it may save you from a broken neck."

Alex took his place at the plate to knock grounders and flies to his men. Harve Foster began to show signs of real life. It was surprising how well the fellows fielded on that rough ground. Even Tug caught a fly.

The captain of the nine had almost made up his mind to smile, when a streak of yellow flashed past Joe Lowell at short and went tearing toward center field. Tug emitted a wild yell of encouragement. Nick let out a whoop and left third at full speed. "Hec's after something!" yelled Nelse. "It's in the wall; I think I saw it duck. Must be a wood-chuck."

"He's been after 'em for five years and never caught one," protested Alex; "get back on the job."

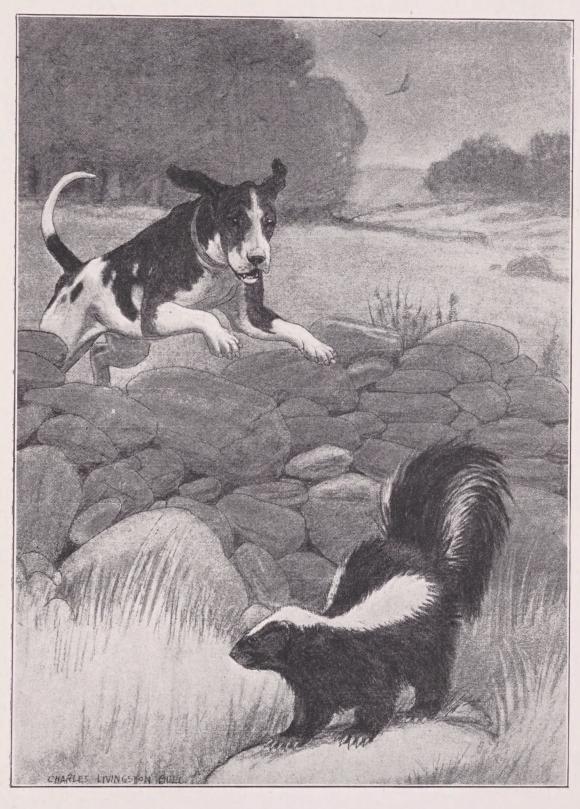
"He'll get this one," cried Tug. "He's in the open country now. I hope he doesn't kill it," he added.

Hec himself gave tongue as he flew. He seemed to feel that he had been out of the lime-light overlong and that his hour of triumph had struck. He caught a second fleeting glimpse of his quarry and lengthened his stride. "Go it!" shouted Nelse.

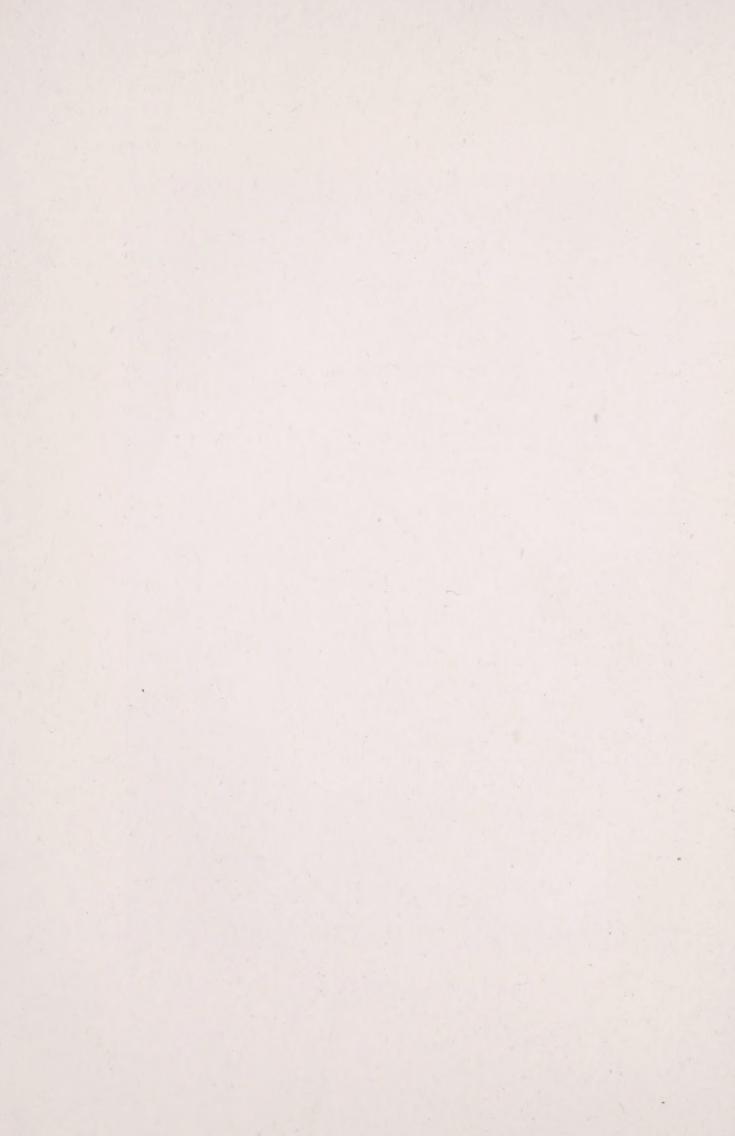
"Come back here!" ordered Tug.

But Hec, for once, was out of hand. Even Cotton started for the distant corner of the wall. The nine was strung across the field like a pack of hounds on a hot scent. Tug, torn between dread, and pride in his hound, ran as fast as he could, shouting, begging, pleading with Hec to stop before he added murder in the first degree to his list of accomplishments.

Twenty times they had seen woodchucks somersault into holes about two seconds ahead of fatal trouble. But now only a stone wall offered refuge. The animal appeared out of a tangle of briars, scrambled up onto the stones, turned to look over its shoulder at approaching fate. Nelse saw, slid to a stop, uttered a piercing yell. But Hec plunged on. Then it happened.



"BUT HEC PLUNGED ON"



First came a startled, then agonized, yelp from the outraged Hec. For an instant he was paralyzed. The next and Tug had him by the collar. The next and Tug, too, gave tongue. "Oh! Oh!" he wailed. "It's a skunk!"

Nelse Pease, rolling over and over on the ground, at last sat, up and held his nose. "Tell us something we can't hear," he gurgled.

"Beat it!" urged Harve. "Good night!" He turned and fled. The whole field reeked with the fruits of Hec's impetuosity. Even Tug deserted his loyal companion and started back toward the boys.

"Get away from me!" yelled Nelse. "You're as bad as either of the others. Go drown yourself."

"But I haven't done anything," grieved Tug.

"Then go do something," commanded Nelse. "Go dig a hole and bury yourself. Go do any old thing, only do it six thousand miles from here."

"But I don't like it any better than you do. It's—it's making me sick."

"It's made me. Go away, I tell you! There's a whole lake over there. Use it all. And take that

cologne hound with you. I don't like you. I'll bet it's killed all his fleas," he added hopefully.

The thoroughly frightened and very sick Tug turned to his constant stand-by in time of trouble. "What'll I do, Joe?" he gulped.

"I dunno. Keep away from me mostly." He caught the expression on the smaller lad's face. "There's a swamp down there," he suggested; "why don't you and Hec go and roll in it? Leave your clothes there and then go take a swim. I'll collect something at camp for you to wear and bring it to you."

"Take him the kerosene an' Harve's hair oil an' all the soap an' some onions an' the joss stick," urged Nelse, "an' don't wait for us, Tuggie; go right along now. You've driven all the honey bees across the lake already."

"You fellows act like it was all my fault," mourned Tug. "I'm not having a bit of fun; I'm gettin' sicker an' sicker."

"What do you think we're doing?" demanded Fat; "hanging round to get up a testimonial for that honeysuckle hound of yours? If he was mine, I'd boil him in perfumery and feed him nothing but candied violets for a week. You go spoil the lake!"

"Really, you'd better," advised Joe kindly. "I'll go get your things. It's pretty thick around here for more ball. Even Alex's getting kinder pale."

Hec, having recovered enough from the surprise to begin to appreciate himself, began to roll and whimper and then to roll some more. "He's having a fit," yelled Nick.

"Do you blame him?" cried Nelse. "Stop him, Tug, before he gets it rubbed in good."

"But he doesn't like it."

"Then he's got more sense than he had five minutes ago," was the unsympathetic rejoinder. "There's a breeze over by the home plate; I'm going to get into it and follow it a long way."

Three or four of the others were already running away from there and Nick was after them hardly before the words were out of his mouth. "Come on, Dick," he called over his shoulder.

Dick, who had been watching Tug's face, shook

his head. "Guess I'll go help Tug," he said slowly.

Ned Field, hearing, halted. "You get one more guess," he stated. "Your job's to bring food to camp. There're a heap more important things than kindheartedness to think about now. You come with me."

"He's right," decreed Joe. "Two don't make a crowd, generally, but I've a hunch that Tug and Hec are going to seem like a mob. Beat it! Tug, meet me at the swimming hole in ten minutes. Dick, you go along with Ned."

"But it's too early."

"Any time's too late to get out of this place," declared Field. "We'll go up and sit on the bee-hive at the Brays' or do something equally peaceful. I feel the need of a change. Come on."

Although his naturally kind heart had urged him to stay and attempt to comfort Tug, he found going away from that particular spot anything but a discomfort. Nor did Ned allow him to linger. "I like Hec," the latter declared, as he finally dropped back into a walk; "he's a mighty fine dog. But,

for the next week or so, I'm going to be able to get along a whole lot without his company."

"It wasn't his fault," declared Dick; "he thought it was a 'chuck."

"I dunno what he thought, and I'd hate to know what he's thinking now, but I'm mighty sure of one thing,—he's going to take a whole lot less interest in untamed Nature from now on. Let's forget him as long as we can." He turned into a path which led into the woods at the rear of the camp. "Know anything about following a trail, or tracks, or reading signs in the woods?" he asked.

"A little. I've always liked to read books about such things. But I haven't been able to get away from work to get into the woods much lately."

"The Wolves are rather good at that stuff," Ned observed, with a touch of pride. "We've pulled off one or two rather keen bits of work like—" He stopped, his face growing scarlet. He remembered too late that the boy at his side had been

the cause of the Patrol's greatest exploit in this direction.

"I've heard Mr. Nelson tell how you fellows tracked that man in the Stone gang," he said quietly. "It was fine. I wish—"

He, too, stopped. For a moment there was an uncomfortable silence. Then Ned, because he was that sort of fellow, took the plunge headlong. "See here," he said, "every chap in the Patrol wants to forget some parts of that mess and you want to do what all the rest are doing. There wasn't any argument about taking you in; there hasn't been anything but pats on the back since we did get you; you're all right and you'll be righter if you'll just forget you haven't always been a Wolf. I'm no preacher and I'm not going to try to be one. I've had my say now and we're going to call that part a day. If you've read a lot about trailing, why don't you specialize in woodcraft and get your first merit badge in that?"

"Could I?"

"That's up to you. You've got to accumulate

a lot of 'em, if you're going to do your full part for the honor of the Wolves. We've more merit badges than any other patrol in the Troop, and I guess you're the sort who'll do your share."

"I'll try."

"Sure, you will!"

"How's the best way to do it?"

Ned did not have to stop to think. "Get Mr. Steve to teach you," he said. "What that man doesn't know about Scouting, ain't. Besides that, he used to spend a lot of his time up in Northern Canada before the war, and he knows the big woods just about the way he knows his way around the Mayhew plant."

"Do you think he'd take the time?"

"No, I don't: I know he would. Isn't he our Scout Master. All he's got to do is to find out what you're interested in, and then all you've got to do is work your head off to remember all the things he'll tell and show you."

Dick considered this for a moment. It seemed beyond belief that Stephen Mayhew would bother Scouting to realize that the man would have spent much time in finding out what would interest him, had he not expressed an interest in some phase of the work. Mr. Steve was not a Scout Master because he liked the title; he was one because he liked boys, and wanted to do all in his power to teach them useful things. "I'll try not to make him tell me anything twice," Dick promised.

"You will, if you've any sense," Ned chuckled. "He might do it once or twice, but then something would sorter happen so that the whole Patrol would get wise to the fact that you'd forgotten something you should have remembered. And they'd get wise to it in such a funny way that you'd find yourself at the hot end of a ripping old joke. And it's no fun to have Mr. Steve lead the laugh on you. I've been there; I know. He can be a good teacher, but he can laugh just as loud as any of the gang. That's why we'd all get out and die for him any old time."

"If he'll help me, I'll try not to disappoint him," Dick promised.

CHAPTER V

MR. STEVE TAKES A HAND

DICK found that first visit to the Bray farm a thoroughly enjoyable affair. Mrs. Bray was not only motherly and jovial, but he gathered the idea, from watching the things she packed in the baskets for them, that she was about as good a cook as could be found in that, or any other, district. Ned insisted on paying cash for what they received, telling her that it was a Wolf rule to pay as they went, and she took their money almost under protest, making them each take a handful of cookies to eat on the way back to camp. Her idea, she said, was to do all she could to make their summer pleasant, and her chief regret was that she had to charge them anything at all. Dick began to wonder if Scouting was all like this, if every one went out of his

way to help a fellow. He had quite forgotten Hanson.

In no particular need to get back to camp, they took their time on the return trip. Ned, remembering the conversation on woodcraft, started to teach his companion a few of the more simple signs of the trail. He did not spend more than two minutes at it, however. That time was more than sufficient to show him that he should be the pupil. "If you've learned all this from books," he declared, "I'm going to eat about six when I get back to Gill-field."

"It's about all theory," Dick confessed. "I've never had much chance to try it out, though. Sometime I hope I'll get a chance to go into the real woods."

"I'd want about ten guides with me," Ned acknowledged. "The one thing I've had night-mares about is getting lost in the wilderness."

"You couldn't really get lost, if you kept your head."

"Couldn't I!" he laughed. "You don't know

one of two things,—the woods or my bean."

"All you've got, to do is keep the direction in your mind."

"Sure! That's all right in your theory stuff, but you'd find it a mighty different thing in one of those 'trackless forest' things you read about."

"Honestly, Ned, I don't think so."

"It would make a bully old debate," he chuckled, "but I don't see how we're going to move any wilderness here to prove you're wrong."

"You don't need a wilderness to prove I'm right."

Ned looked at him curiously. "I'm from Missouri," he admitted; "come through."

"I might not be able to do it," he said thoughtfully. "Probably I couldn't. But, if I could, it would prove a little of what I've said."

"If you're no better at blazing a clear trail through the woods than you are through the English language, I'll say you're going to be a Tenderfoot for some centuries, old top. Whatcher mumbling about?"

"I don't know the way back to camp from here. We came across lots from the ball field. I can take you to camp, I think, on a direct line."

"Some stunt!" mocked Ned. "Shin a tree and you can see the camp."

"That's true, too." He thought for a moment. "I'll tell you what I'd like to do," he said slowly, "I'd like to prove that direction's an easy thing to keep in your mind and follow. You blindfold me and then take me by the hand and I'll take you to camp. All you've got to do is face me directly at the camp after you've blindfolded me and then promise not to bunt me into any trees."

"You couldn't do it in a month."

"I'll do it in twenty minutes."

"See here, young feller-me-lad, about now's where your bluff's called good and plenty. You're only a Tenderfoot and you've got to be taken down a few. You're on! But, if you don't deliver the goods, you do all my work from now until you go back to town Monday."

"All right," agreed Dick. "But, if I do deliver the goods, you do all mine."

"I'm game but not worried." He took the scarf from about his neck. "The camp lies there," he said, and pointed into the woods. "That is the bee line."

"That's all I need to know. Put on the hanky."

He threw his head back and stood there while it was bound tight over his eyes. "I can't see a thing," he stated. "Can you carry both baskets. I don't want to spill mine."

"We'll cache 'em both here. It isn't far and we can come back for 'em. Don't want any handicaps." He took Dick's burden and hung it on the branch of a tree, then put his own on one near by. "Ready?"

"If you're going to make this test at all worth while, spin me around a few times and try to mix me up."

"You're crazy," declared the amazed Ned.

"Maybe. Only I don't want a guilty conscience when I see you doing my job."

"Don't you worry about such little things, Tenderfoot. But you need taking down, so you're going to get took. Here goes!" He grabbed him by the shoulder and turned him rapidly, first one way, then the other, until he not only believed that Dick had not the remotest idea which way he was facing, but was rather more than sure he was decidedly dizzy. "Hike!" he commanded at last. "Here's my hand. I'll stop you before you collide with anything and tell you to stop before you can trip. I'll also inform you about the footing and I'll stop you before we get too far from camp for comfort."

The blindfolded boy only nodded. His head was still thrown back. Slowly he began to turn from the direction in which Ned had faced him. Once he hesitated, took a forward step, then turned a little more. "We'll go this direction instead of yours," he said, at last.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" It was frank tribute. Hunt was facing directly toward the camp. And he went to the very steps on the building on as direct a line as his stumbling feet would permit. When

Ned removed the bandage, he held out his hand. "You're a wonder!" he declared. "How on earth'd you do it?"

"Easy enough. Followed my face."

"Naturally. You didn't walk backward."

"I mean the wind on it. I marked the way the breeze struck my face when you told me where the camp was. I kept my face into it as we came here. You really can't get lost in the woods, if you keep your head."

"What if the wind changes?"

"You go back and get those baskets," laughed Dick. "You'll have to earn that information, too."

Ned, being a Wolf, accepted his defeat with a grin and went back alone for the supplies. But he had his own good-natured revenge by making the over-modest Dick squirm when he told the rest about the affair while they were killing time before supper.

"You're an easy mark to fall for such stuff," declared Fat Foster. "The Tenderfoot didn't follow any balmy breeze. He knew Hec was here and just followed his nose."

"Hec isn't very bad now," protested Tug, above the general roar.

"Maybe not, son," drawled Fat, "maybe not. But he isn't exactly what you'd term a bunch of sweet peas yet. I'll bet I can find him blindfolded if you start us ten miles apart. Hello, who's that?"

One or two turned languidly to glance up the rough lane. The next instant all were on their feet. "Three cheers for Mr. Steve!" shouted Joe.

The man waved acknowledgment as he came on, then sat down on the steps. "Am I too late for supper?" he asked.

"Should say not! Hi, Stan!" Joe called. "Mr. Steve's here, so see if you can boil him an egg without burning it on both sides."

"Hello, Chief!" Nick, too, stuck his head through the kitchen window and grinned a welcome. "Will you have your bacon à la Newburg or with cabbage on the side?" "En casserole," laughed Mr. Steve. "And fry my coffee en brochette."

"One pig in a pan and coffee with chilblains," ordered Stan. "Give us ten minutes more."

"You ought to get ten days for the lunch we had," growled Nelse. "Open a can of beans; we've got to eat to-night."

The increasing din from the kitchen held forth a promise of real work for them all within a short time. "What brought you down here on the hoof, sir?" asked Nelse. "Bubble bust?"

"No. Left it at the head of the lane so it wouldn't. Need a bit of exercise, anyway, seem to be getting fat, sitting at a desk so much."

"Come up here for a week," blurted Tug.

Joe Lowell turned on him with a quick frown. "He's going to the sea shore for his vacation," he said, for the second time. "We're not going to gum his game this summer by teasing till he comes to us."

"Wouldn't take much teasing, Joe," laughed Stephen Mayhew, settling himself more comfortably and looking in real content. "This is a good place and I'm rather thinking you chaps need a bit of looking after."

"What's wrong now?" There was real anxiety in Cotton's voice for once.

"Dunno, Alex. That's one of the things I came up to find out about."

Like a flash they were all attention. Even the vaguest hint of disapproval from the Scout Master troubled them, and there was more than hint in his sober tone. "What is it, sir?" asked Joe.

"I don't suppose it's really anything, fellows, but, in justice to all concerned, I thought I'd better get the other side of the story. Hanson came to the office this afternoon and said that our truck had run into his team and, that, after the smash, one of you threw a rock at one of his horses and cut it. Said he wanted a hundred dollars damages at once or he'd sue father. Burke says it's all a lie."

"How about it, Dick?" asked Lowell. "You were with Burke."

"It is a lie," he stated evenly, "every word of it.

I—"

"That's enough," broke in Mr. Mayhew. "The word of a Wolf needs no embellishment, old man. But I'm going to tell you all right now that you've got to be mighty careful with that man Hanson and how you handle him. He's bad medicine and he's evidently out to make trouble. None of the farmers up here like him and none here, or in Gillfield, have the remotest idea why he goes out of his way to bother my father. We never heard of him before he moved here and," he finished with a sigh, "we wish he'd never come."

"Of all crazy lies, that tale of his about Dick is the limit," exploded Nelse. "Dick couldn't hit a horse with a rock. We've had him trying to play ball; we know."

Mr. Steve smiled. "See that you're able to joke about everything Hanson springs," he warned. "He's a bad actor. I believe I'll take a swim before supper," he said abruptly. "Anybody game?"

"I've only been in twice," announced Nelse. "I'll go and Tug's got to."

Three others were more than willing volunteers but, as they rose, Dick Hunt hung back and moved toward Joe, who had frankly owned he was too lazy to go in again. For several moments they sat in silence, looking toward the lake. Joe knew the other had something on his mind, but knew the best thing to do was to let him get it off in his own way.

It came at length and with a rush. "Do you think he thinks I started anything with Hanson?"

"Did he say so?" came the quiet question.

"No."

"Don't you think he's the sort who says what he thinks?"

"I suppose he is."

"Don't you know he is?"

"Yes."

"See here, Dick," Joe said, after a little pause, "you seem to forget that you're one of us and that, if you make a statement, that statement goes. That

holds for Mr. Steve as much as for the fellows. We trust each other absolutely and we've never had cause to do anything else. We'd stand by each other through anything and I think now that the Old Boss would stand behind us iust as firmly as would Mr. Steve. You've answered his question squarely and he's forgotten everything but your answer. And he knew your answer was going to be just what it was. He only asked in order to give you a chance to clear yourself, as any real man would do. It was your right to be heard and he saw you had your rights. Now forget it. You'll never get anywhere at all if you go round thinking that perhaps some of us don't believe all you say. This kind of talk bores me stiff. Come on down and watch the bunch swim."

It was all very well for Joe to say such things, and Dick did his best to believe them; but a boy who has gone through what he had finds it most difficult to comprehend that people have banished suspicion and enthroned friendship. The more he tried to forget it all, the more he wondered why, if Mr. Steve be-

lieved none of the charges Hanson had made, he had come rushing up to camp to face him with the matter. He knew his weakness had nearly been fatal to the Mayhew plant during the war; he could well see how the Mayhews could still view him with distrust. Joe might say what he liked but Dick still believed, in his supersensitive way, that he could see the other side of the shield.

He tried his best to enter into the hilarious fun about the supper table but, for the first time, had a sickening sensation in his heart that he was an outsider to it all. He almost wished he had not come; he began to wonder could he find an excuse to go back to Gillfield in the morning, rather than wait for Monday's dawn.

Stephen Mayhew would not have held the place which was his in all their hearts had he not been one of these very few men who understand boys, because able to put himself in their place, to see things with the eyes of the boy he had never forgotten he had been but a few years ago. Dick Hunt was still the unknown quantity to him. He

approved of his having been taken into the Wolves but, far more than Commissioner Nichols, he appreciated that the boy's path was not to be lined entirely with primroses. Nor would he have had it so. Such a circumstance would not bring out the good he was sure was in Dick. He knew little things would worry the boy, and that, boylike, he would be prone to make mountains out of mole hills. Therefore, as he saw him grow more and more quiet, he watched him the more closely. And, as he watched, he began to sense the situation.

But he was not a man to make sudden moves which might betray his intentions. After leaving the table, he spent half an hour with them all playing catch before the camp and then, as if it were a necessity just recalled, abruptly threw his glove onto the veranda; "I'd like nothing better than to loaf round here the rest of the evening," he announced, "but I've got to get back to town and, before I go, I've got to see Mr. Bray. Why don't two or three of you, who've nothing better to do, stroll up there with me? We can come back by the road and I'll

pick my car up where I left it, and then the bodyguard can come back to camp with a sense of duty well done and the absolute certainty that no night stalking chipmunk has bitten me on the hind leg."

"Take Hec and nothing'll dare go near you," suggested Nelse.

"I've got to go back to Gillfield, son. I love the memory of Hec, but I'm not yearning to be reminded of him fragrantly for the next forty-eight hours. But, for your kindly thought, you're chosen one of the bodyguard. You need the exercise; you're getting fat."

"Oh, gee! I've walked seven hundred and 'steen miles already." Nelse did his best to look downcast but he made a dive for his coat. "Who else gets roasted?"

Mr. Steve chuckled. "It's fine to be popular," he observed. "So long as there're so many eager volunteers, let's give the Tenderfoot first chance. How about it, Dick?"

"I'd like to go, sir."

"Then come on. Anything I can do for you in town, fellows?"

"Guess not."

"Bring yourself up to-morrow."

"Tell our people we're still alive, if you see any of 'em."

"I'll see most of them in church in the morning. Maybe I'll drive up in the afternoon. Take care of yourselves. And, say, Tug, I'll bring the cat up, if you think it will occupy Hec round camp."

"Never mind the cat, sir," laughed the little fellow gamely; "but you might slip my mother the tip that my wardrobe is mostly missing by request and that I could use some more clothes."

"I'll do that thing. Don't eat any poison ivy, fellows, and don't go swimming more than six times to-morrow. Too much water wears off the skin, you know. Good night. Come on, you two grithitters!"

He swung off into the path through the woods at a pace which made Nelse realize that his confession of weariness had not been all joke. "Say," he wailed, "I'm perfectly willing to get to the Brays' this evening, but what's the idea in trying to arrive there this afternoon?"

Mr. Steve grinned as he slowed up a trifle. "I keep forgetting how delicate you are, Nelse," he apologized. "Want us to carry you? We can make a lady's chair."

"Go to it!" he agreed promptly.

"Are you game, Dick?"

"I'm trying to be game but I'm not foolish, sir. He'd let us do it."

"First bluff called," declared Nelse in triumph.

"And here's where the second starts," was the instantaneous rejoinder. 'I need exercise." He broke into a swinging trot, at which Nelse uttered a loud wail, then started after him.

"I've got blisters on both heels," he laughed, "but you can't last long enough to raise any on my lungs."

"We'll see about that, old chap; I'm not as soft as you think."

It was a test which Dick remembered for a long

time but he kept up gamely, although he was puffing like a grampus when they came to a halt at the Brays' back door. "I'll say I'd hate to tackle you when you were in condition," acknowledged Nelse. "You aren't even gasping, sir."

"You aren't exactly a wreck yourself," was the quick retort. "Dick can stand a bit more outdoor work, though."

"I'm—I'm all—right." He sat down on the step and held his stabbing side. "Keepin' books—doesn't im—prove th'—wind."

"Something in that. Oh, Mr. Bray!"

The door opened and a gaunt, smooth faced farmer appeared in his shirt sleeves. "Hello, Mr. Mayhew!" he said heartily. "What brings you up here this time of night? Anything wrong?"

"No. Been down at the camp for supper. Just dropped in to tell you your friend Hanson's on the rampage again."

"He's no friend of mine. What's he up to now?"

Mr. Steve gave him a brief outline on the charge

Hanson had made. "Hunt, here, who was on our truck with our man, says it's not so and Burke agrees with him. Naturally I'd believe the people I trust, even if I didn't know Hanson. But that hasn't much to do with what I want to find out. It's why he seems to have a grudge against anything connected with the Mayhew name."

"Haven't the remotest idea. Ever since he moved onto the hill farm, he's had it in for everyone. When it isn't one thing, it's another. Something's always wrong. He acts half cracked."

"Know anything about his history or where he came from?"

"Not a thing," admitted the farmer.

"We'd buy the place and get rid of him, if he hadn't a three-year lease on it. What I'm really afraid of is that he's going to bother the boys down at camp. They'll leave him alone, but we're a little anxious lest he try to get at us through them. You fellows," he said, turning to the boys, "can forget all about what you're hearing. I'm talking to Mr. Bray alone."

"Want us to get out?"

"Not a bit of it, Nelse."

"The boys have been up here too much for any white man to believe anything against them," declared Mr. Bray. "We farmers like to have 'em at the lake. They've helped—" He stopped and looked over his shoulder. Mr. Steve, too, heard the rattle of the approaching team. A moment more and it had turned into the yard. "Wonder who's coming here to-night?" muttered Bray.

The raw-boned horse was driven close to the little group before being jerked to a halt. "Be that ye, Bray?" demanded a rough voice.

"Yes."

"Um! Who be with ye?"

"Friends o' mine."

The man leaned further from the buggy to peer into the darkness. Then came an explosive exclamation. "I'll be goin'." And he yanked savagely on the reins.

But, before the old horse could start, Stephen Mayhew had caught the bridle. "As long as you're

here, Hanson," he stated quietly, "you'd better stay a moment; I want to talk with you."

"Don't want nothin' to do with you, nor any other Mayhew."

"You've changed since afternoon; you were looking for one of us then, I understand."

"All I wants is my rights an' I'm goin' to have 'em. Leave go that bridle!"

"In good time," Mr. Mayhew agreed calmly. "What was your idea in coming to our office with a cock and bull story about being damaged by our truck and assaulted by one of these boys?"

"Too late to find that out now. That boy thar's makin' trouble fer me. I'll get him. An' ye can settle in court, ye Mayhews. I seen my lawyer."

"There are lawyers who'll take most any case, I presume," Mr. Mayhew said, with a grim smile. "But now, while we're man to man, with no lawyers present and only good and disinterested witnesses, I want to tell you one thing and have you remember it: all those boys down at the lake are to be let alone. They are on our property; they are under

our protection. They are not looking for trouble; they will make no trouble. If there should be trouble, and it is beyond their power to take care of themselves, there are people who are ready to do it for them. Do you understand that?"

"I didn't come here to be preached at an' threatened by no Mayhew."

"What you came for is none of my business; what you've been told is very much mine. I'm glad to have had the chance to make it clear. It's hands off for you, Hanson! Good night. Come on, boys."

CHAPTER VI

DICK HUNT STRIKES OUT

DICK's long months of self-probation had reacted upon him far differently than he appreciated. Instead of giving him the self-confidence and assurance he had supposed were his, these hoped-for shields were vulnerable defenses when he came to put them to the test. Stephen Mayhew had done all a man could do to show his trust in him, but long weeks without companionship had left Dick morbid to some extent. He realized people had tried to help him, had trusted him in positions of responsibility, but he had the weakness of many other sensitive boys,—he doubted himself.

Why, he did not know. All that he could think of was that some one "was down on him" again. That this "some one" was a man apparently so unreasonable and pugnacious as Hanson, mattered

nothing at all. The great and outstanding fact was that he thought himself again suspected of something. His sufferings under his former trial had been so overwhelming that now he could only remember them and dread what was to come.

All day Sunday he did his best to take a fullhearted share in the activities of the Wolves. The boys had no idea that anything was preying on him. If they gave his rather quiet demeanor a thought, it was only to lay it to the fact that he was new to the Patrol and unexplainably slow in finding himself. They laughed away his tentative suggestion that he return to Gillfield that evening instead of early Monday morning and, because he could find no valid excuse to go, he stuck it out until dawn. But then he stole out of the camp and started the long hike without waiting for anything to eat, or waking any one to say good-by. Only Hec was awake, but Dick found real comfort in the dog's delight at finding some one willing to be friends with him.

Yet, as the week aged, each day away from Camp

Lowell passed more slowly. He wanted to be with the fellows once more and began to think he had made a very large mountain out of something not much bigger than an ant hill. He even hunted up Bill Long of the Fox Patrol with the idea of sounding him about that ball game. It proved a different sort of sound. Bill went off like a threealarm.

"Are we going up there!" he demanded. "Does a squirrel like a nut? Ask me! I dare you to ask me."

"I have, haven't I? The fellows want to know."

Bill laughed. "They know," he retorted.

"Only they don't know how sorry they're going to be. We'll do 'em up so brown they'll get lost in the pine needles and other trash."

"The Wolves can play ball."

"They'll need to," asserted Bill. "The Foxes haven't been beaten but twice this year."

"Only twice?"

"Well," owned Bill, "maybe it was three times. But the umpire was rotten in that last game." "You won't have even that excuse this time. How are you going to get to the lake?"

"Most of us have bikes; guess we can borrow enough more."

"Yes, and arrive all tired out and have nothing up your sleeves but an alibi."

"All right," grunted Bill; "then take us up in a pair of your private limousines."

"Maybe I will."

"We won't stick around waiting for you unless it rains. Got anything really interesting on your mind?"

"Might have."

"Funny things always are happening," Bill admitted. "If anything has bored into the personal ivory, take it out and give it a breath of air."

"I'm supply officer for the camp," Dick admitted diffidently.

"They don't much care what happens to 'em, do they?"

"And I'm planning to have a lot of stuff go up

by Mr. Steve's truck Saturday morning," Dick went on.

"Here, hold up!" yelled Bill. "Go slow, now. You're showin' traces of sense. Don't get all tangled up in yourself."

"And I didn't know but Mr. Steve would let us have one of the bigger trucks so's there'd be room for all you chaps to ride."

"Nothin' doin', son!" declared Bill promptly. "We're Scouts, not sponges. The Foxes don't beg."

"Neither do the Wolves. Don't you get, any ideas like that. One of your worst bits of hard luck is that you haven't got Mr. Steve for a Scout Master. You leave it to me."

It sounded so attractive that Bill wavered. "Suppose you may know something about your own business," he generously admitted. "But don't you get the Foxes in wrong. We don't ask favors."

"That's one reason I want to send you up by freight. We don't want any excuses after you're licked. The Wolves know how to take care of their guests. You just leave things to me and have your crowd ready to start when I say."

"When'll you say?"

"Try to get word to you early to-morrow."

"I'm goin' to be down town," offered Bill. "I'll drop in at the bank and save you the trouble of lookin' for me. So long now! I'm busy. Got to give the canary its singing lesson." With which he bolted for the back door, fearful lest his good luck desert him before he could get to safety. Anything was better than pushing a bicycle up to Forest Lake; few things would be better than an automobile ride with the rest of the Foxes.

Nor did Dick, full of his new idea, stand around to allow any crops to become harvestable beneath his shoes. On the chance of finding Mr. Steve still at his desk, he headed for the Mayhew plant and did not begin to appreciate that he had taken the bit in his teeth until he found himself face to face, not only with Mr. Steve, but with the Old Boss.

"Well?" exploded the latter promptly, eyeing the hard-breathing lad from beneath bushy brows.

"What did Nelson send you up here so fast about? Stephen overdrawn his account?"

Dick knew how well nigh impossible that would be, so gathered that Mr. Mayhew was joking with him. "Guess I've overdrawn mine," he gulped.

He saw Stephen Mayhew start, and his own face went scarlet. "I don't mean anything like that," he explained hastily. "Honestly, I'm all right. Only I've made a mess of things, I guess."

The Old Boss snorted as if both angry and thoroughly disgusted. "Sit down and tell us about it," he ordered in a voice he intended to sound exceedingly gruff and forbidding. "Be surprised if any boy in Gillfield ever did anything but make messes of everything. What have you done?"

Dick had learned one thing, at least. Nothing was to be gained by holding anything back. "I've told some of the fellows, who are going up to camp to visit to-morrow, that I thought you an' Mr. Steve'd lend us a machine to take us all up in."

"You have, have you? Umph!"

"I was planning to send the little truck with supplies for the kids, Father."

"Oh, you were, were you!"

"I were," grinned the son.

"Don't see why I hang around this office. I don't own it; I don't have anything to say about it." He wheeled on Dick. "You need a lesson, young man," he rumbled; "you're too free with other people's things. You can't have my truck to transport all Gillfield up to the lake. What'd those boys want to visit the camp for, anyway?"

"We challenged them to come up and play ball," gulped Dick.

"Did, did you? How'd you get down Monday morning?"

"Walked, sir."

"Aren't they as strong as you?"

"Guess so, sir."

"Don't you know so? Stop guessing! What you goin' to do, now you can't truck 'em up?"

"I haven't—haven't decided, sir. I thought most prob'ly Mr. Steve would say it was all right."

"Most prob'ly he would have. He doesn't own that truck, either."

Dick turned to Stephen Mayhew as if for help in his hour of need but he was looking out of a window. He knew his father; he had an idea that Dick was going to. "All right, sir," said the boy gamely. "I'll go tell Long right away that I had no business to suggest such a thing."

"Do that, would you?"

"Why, of course, sir. It's my fault."

"Wouldn't tell him the Mayhews were stingy with their trucks?"

"You're not."

"Don't try to get round me by flattery, boy!" roared the Old Boss. "I won't stand it. You can't have that truck. I've said so and I keep my word."

"I understand, sir. Good afternoon."

"Here, wait a minute! What time's that ball game?"

"About two, I guess, sir."

"Don't you know? I told you not to guess."

"I don't know how long it will take us to walk up; I can only guess."

"I will be obeyed in my own office. That game is at two o'clock. There are two touring cars in my garage; Stephen will drive one, my chaffeur the other. They will leave this office at twelve noon, to-morrow. They will take any one who happens to be here at twelve to Camp Lowell. But I will not have my trucks running round loose. Now get out of here! Both of you," he roared as he wheeled on his laughing son. "I'm boss of this office still. Get out!"

Dick went. He also went home in Mr. Steve's runabout, wondering how he had ever managed to revive the idea that every hand was turned against him. It did not occur to him that he had done far more for others than for himself. His mind was full of the fun the Wolves were going to be able to give their guests. It was all he could do not to ask Mr. Steve to drive round by Bill's house so that he could spread the good news at once.

But Bill, in the morning, proved some worthy

little spreader. The Foxes were quite keen about Dick Hunt. Not one of them thought he had done them personal injury by providing real cars for the trip, and not one admitted that he would have preferred to have ridden a bicycle to the lake. In fact, they were so anxious to show they had only the kindest of feelings for him, that they camped on the steps of the Mayhew office building at eleventhirty.

Nor had this enthusiasm decreased when they arrived at Camp Lowell a little after twelve-thirty. The Wolves met them with a yell of welcome. Dick himself felt almost like a guest of honor until Ned Field grabbed him by the arm. "Where's the stuff you were going to bring?" he demanded.

"Coming up this afternoon with Burke. Wasn't room for it all. Did you need any of it this noon?

"If I had, what good would it do me? That bunch wouldn't eat excuses and we've got to fill 'em full of food, if we're going to beat 'em. Full to the front teeth," he added.

"Is that fair?"

"They'll say so," grinned Ned. "I've toted a big freezer of ice cream down from the Bray place. We're going to picnic on the steps. You're a waiter. Report to Stan."

Dick found Tug and Nick already busy carrying plates of sandwiches to the veranda. Harve was sitting on the railing watching the proceedings with eager eyes. "I thought there was a ham," he said at last.

"What'd you think's in these sandwiches?" growled Nick.

Fat gazed at the thick allurements. "They look like little samples to me," he confessed. "Hi, Bill, come up here and sit by me!"

"I'm going to get nearer the door," laughed Long.

"Going to have hot coffee, too?" asked Mr. Steve, staring at the tray full of cups Stan bore from the kitchen.

"Sure!"

"Betcher!" echoed Harve. "Need something hot with ice cream. It thaws the throat so's you can

swallow easier. Come on, Foxes; eat hearty. You won't feel like eating to-night."

They went at the piles of food without further urging, Stephen Mayhew helping the Wolves in seeing that their guests were properly cared for and doing his full share toward keeping the laughter under full steam. Bill Long, after his third plate of ice cream, stretched his arms over his head. "Seems a crime to play ball on a day like this," he announced.

"Kind of ball you ginks can play probably is one," comforted Nelse. "We might as well beat you so we can go swimming and have some real fun."

"You'll be too worn out from shagging hits to want to swim," prophesied Bill. "Where do you keep your diamond?"

"Best way to find that out," suggested Joe, "is to come-see."

"Does a jitney run that way?" queried Eben Wilder, who had done his best to equal Harve's ice-cream record. "Something tells me that, if it's

more than a mile, I'm not going to live long." He reached for the fielder's glove on the steps at his side. "Any one remember to bring a ball?"

"Hope some of you did," growled Nelse. "Hec's chewed four of ours into pulp. Come on, Bill! I'll lead you by the hand and take care no blue jay scares you to death."

"How about all these cups and saucers?" yelled Stan from the kitchen. "Don't be in such a gladsome rush."

"Oh, heave 'em into the lake and let 'em soak," advised Harve.

"Finish 'em up and bring your kitchen crew as soon as you can," ordered Mr. Steve. "We'll go slowly."

"You bet!" declared Harve. "Eb and I have a date to race an inch worm through the woods. And don't leave my cup full of soap again, Stan," he called.

"If you feel that way," chuckled Joe, "stay and help with the job."

For an instant Harve caught his eye. "Sure!"

he agreed. "Trot along, Eb. The Royal Order of Benevolent Dishrag Artists has got to hold a lodge meeting. We'll catch up before you get much of anywhere." And he darted into the kitchen.

Dick, too, stayed behind to give a helping hand and, when the camp had been policed, swung off into the woods at the heels of the other three, as anxious as they to reach the scene of what they proposed should be a massacre. As they vaulted the rail fence which enclosed the ball field, Long was in loud voiced argument with Lowell. "Maybe it is all you say," he protested, "but I still claim it should be as far from first to second as it is from second to third. Second base is about ten feet too far south."

"If you like the idea of sliding through those blackberry bushes, move it," Joe assented. "We've been sorter tender with our hides so far."

"We've all got on leggings."

"Sure! But you don't know as much about brambles as you do about landscape gardening. We'll move it, though, if you'll be happier."

Bill, having carried his point, strolled out to look over the mat of blackberry runners. "Never mind," he agreed; "we'd rather give you the advantage of home grounds. Why don't we begin? Your kitchen ladies have arrived. Will Mr. Mayhew umpire?"

"Sure!"

"All right. Play ball, then. We're at bat, I suppose. Get your men in position."

"Ready, fellows?" Joe ran across the rough field to short and held up his hand for Wood, the catcher, to throw him the ball. For a minute the Wolf infield did a little fancy throwing which made Long grunt. Then he turned to his own men. "We've got to play ball," he announced. "Go to it! You're up, Eb."

Eben Wilder faced Cotton. "Say good-by to that ball, Alex," he grinned. "I'm going to lose it out in the hay." He waved his bat at Tug, in deep center, where there was more sweet fern than grass. "She's coming your way, Tuggie; don't trip over the scenery."

"Strike one!" called Mr. Steve.

"Say, toss 'em, Alex," yelled Ed. "I'm no lightning rod to connect with that stuff."

But Cotton was far from sinking his teeth into that form of bait. He knew Eb of old and he put all he had on the next ball. The batter grinned cheerfully and let it pass. "Ball one!" declared Mr. Steve.

"Guess I'll walk," said Eb; "it's a lot more comfortable."

"Guess you'll pop a fly to short," corrected Stan, beating his fist into his mit. "That would be a lot more like you. Right into the ole glove, Alex!"

Cotton again wound up. This time he tried to cut the corner. It was ball two. He shook his head at the next signal. He wanted to strike Eb out. Stan called for a high, fast one. Alex nodded and began his swing.

The next moment there was a sharp crack and Eb was racing to first as Nick Reed lunged for the liner which flashed past him into left field. Ney, the Fox second baseman, strolled up to the plate as

unconsciously at if such a clean-cut hit was nothing more than mere routine. "Smear one into center, Ted," ordered Bill.

"Center? Oh, all right." He swung his bat and glanced at Alex.

But Cotton's pride was injured quite as much as his reputation. He was not accustomed to have his offerings greeted with such enthusiasm. He knew Ney could hit and he began to work with greater care. He fooled him once, then teased him into swinging at a wide one. The next two he deliberately wasted. As he wound up again, Eb edged away from first. Alex was watching him from the corner of his eye. Like a flash he wheeled and threw to Field. It was too low. Ned stretched as far as he could, but the ball hit a hummock, bounded off at right angles and Eb dashed for second, then kept on to third.

"Never mind," Joe called. "We'll have a steam roller here next year."

"Tough luck!" sympathized Ed. "But it's going to be just as fair for the Wolves."

"Don't wish you any hard luck," Joe grinned, "but I hope every ball we swat hits a bowlder. Get this gink, Alex."

Cotton, who knew that he, and not the scenery, was responsible for the error, nodded. He sent a floater up to Ney. The batter tried to smash it. A little pop fly sailed out to Nelse. "All mine!" the second baseman triumphed, and ambled over to get under it.

But he overlooked luxuriant Nature. His feet slipped into those blackberry bushes. He tripped, went headlong. "Ouch!" he yelled as the ball hit him flush between the shoulders. One run was in and Ney was safe at first. Even Mr. Steve was laughing. "Say," cried Nelse, "if that had been a bed of four-leaved clovers, I'd never have stepped on one. Never mind, Alex, we'll get some one out sometime."

The inning would have been less disastrous had Tug not muffed a fly which fell squarely into his glove. As it was, the Wolves went to bat with a lead of six runs to overcome and the first discovery they made was that Jack Swift could pitch. It soon dawned over even Dick Hunt that they were staring defeat between the eyes. They had expected a close game; they had had no idea of being on the wrong end of a Roman holiday. They managed to get one run, but that was due to a friendly rock near short rather than superior batting ability.

Cotton began the second more steadily. He knew now that the hope of the Wolves lay with him. He must keep the Foxes from hitting. His reputation as a pitcher was already badly dented. He wanted to rescue that. But he wanted, even more, to have Camp Lowell emerge victorious. He became more deliberate and his fast one began to smoke. A Fox did reach second but he was still there when the inning closed.

The Wolves got another run in their half. They held the Foxes again in the third. Dick Hunt came up to open the last half. He drew a base on balls. Harve Foster went to bat with visions of grabbing Babe Ruth's crown. "Leave the cover on the

thing," begged Nelse. "All you need to do is to swat it far enough to get round once."

Jack Swift looked him over casually. Somehow he did not seem dangerous. He sent one across so fast that Fat was still swinging as the catcher started to return the ball. "Take your time," encouraged Nelse; "only don't take it next week. The object is to hit the object."

"Don't worry about little things," retorted Harve.
"Come on, Jack, I dare you!"

Swift, too, laughed. It was the sort of friendly game they all liked. Anything went and they knew that nothing was meant. True sportsmanship does not prohibit fun between real friends. Swift pitched. If he had not been laughing, he would have had better control. The ball thudded into Harve Foster's ribs. He let out a wild yell.

If it had been a fast one, it might really have hurt. As it was, it "plumped." Harve knew he was not hurt, therefore he lay down tenderly, rolled onto his back and folded his hands on his chest.

Nelse understood. In an instant he was at the plate. The next, he had Fat by the heels and was prancing toward first, dragging the victim behind him.

There was a yell of protest from the Foxes, then a roar. "Got to get a man on base somehow," announced Nelse. "Put a hornet in his ear. That'll bring him to life."

Harve kicked himself free, sat up and glanced at Swift. "Lucky you didn't bean me," he said; "you tried to."

"I didn't. It would have bust the ball. Are you all right now, old man?"

"You'll think so when you see me steal second."

"Dick's on second, you nut!" yelled Nelse. "You obey signals."

"What are they?"

"Hanged if I know! Joe, did we have any signals?"

"Play ball!" chuckled Mr. Steve. "Who's the next victim?"

It was Joe. He liked burlesque as much as the

rest, but he also wanted that game. "Quit fooling, Harve!" he ordered. "We need these runs."

"How can I get a run?" mourned Harve. "The bases are all littered up ahead of me; you do something. I've been the sacrifice; you be the hero. You look like one. Why don't you wash your face?"

Joe's two bagger did account for two runs. Harve had more speed than even he supposed. But Joe was left on second and the score was 6 to 4.

Alex and Nick added two more runs in the fifth. It began to look a real game. The chatter died down. Neither side could afford to fool now. Alex was pitching real ball, but he found Jack was as stingy with hits in the sixth and seventh. "This is something like," declared Long, as he trotted in at the end of the inning.

"Good game, all right," agreed Nelse. "Some fun to fight it out. Wish the diamond was better, though."

"Good enough to have a pile of fun on," stated Bill fervently. "Some party, I'll say!" "We think so, old top. Wish we had you here all the time."

"You've said a face full, Nelse! Who's at bat, Jim?"

A rock between first and second accounted for the Foxes new run. But the Wolves managed to tie the score in the last half of the eighth. Even Hec went wild. He didn't know why, but he ran around in circles and stole Fat's cap. "Take that skunk-hound away from here and park him where he won't be prominent," he ordered Tug. "He'll have some hard luck, if I catch him."

"I'll take him with me," declared Tug. "He doesn't bother me at all."

"You keep him out of left field, then. I don't care what happens in your garden. Give me that hat. Come on, Hec; I know where there's a thistle you can worry."

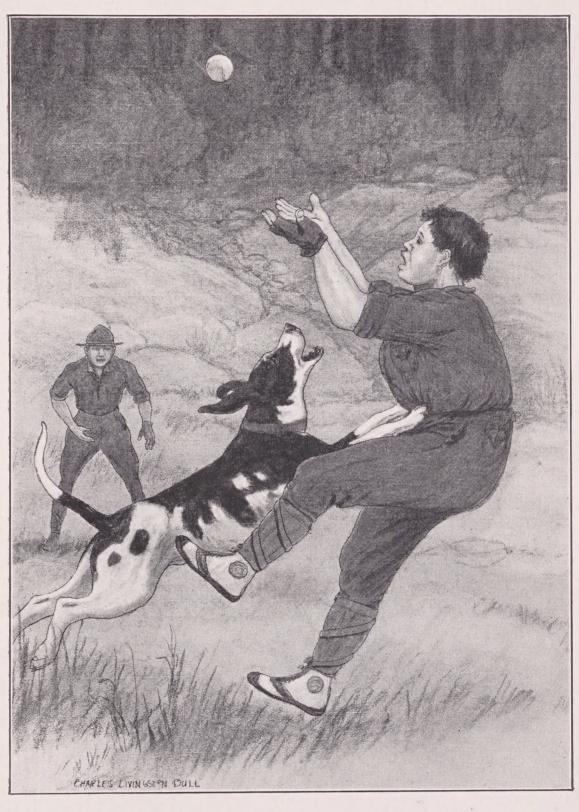
"Play the game," warned Joe, as his men went to their positions. "Seven to seven and we don't want extra innings."

Neither did Alex Cotton. He had been carry-

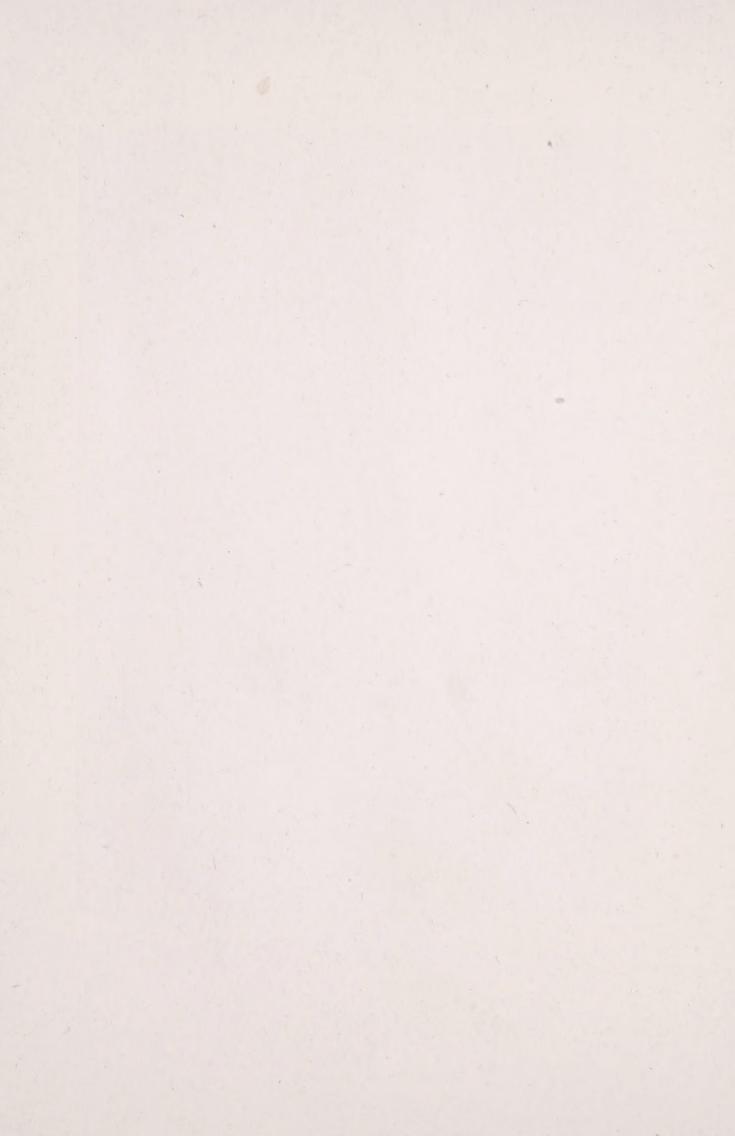
ing the full weight of the game on his shoulders and was tired. He knew extra innings would spell disaster for him. He also knew the weak end of the Wolf batting list came up next. That worried him, too. He became even more deliberate. By mixing curves with speed, he turned back the first Fox. A grounder, Lowell to Field, accounted for the second. Bill Long came up, his jaw set.

He caught the first ball squarely. It went arching out to left, straight for Harve Foster's hands. Alex sighed with sheer relief. Even Fat couldn't drop that fly. Tug, over in center, saw how easy it was. "Yow!" he yelled in triumph. "You take 'em, boy!"

Hec came to life at that cry. Fat had knocked off his cap to see better. The dog saw it fall and started for it at full speed. Then he saw the ball falling into Harve's hands. He loved a ball. His loyalty was tantalized. He didn't know whether to grab the cap or leap for the ball. While he was deciding, he crashed into Harve's legs.



"HE CRASHED INTO HARVE'S LEGS"



There was a yell, a thud, and Harve went sprawling.

Bill Long came to life and picked up his speed as he rounded first.

But Hec had not lost his feet. He saw the ball rolling into the pasture. He was on it in an instant. Dick Hunt, dashing over from right, tried to catch him. That was the sort of game Hec could really appreciate. He dodged, fled a few feet, then turned to lure further pursuit. Bill Long rounded second.

"Hit him with a rock!" roared Harve, joining in the chase.

"Hec! Hec, come here!" commanded Tug shrilly.

The pup heard the one voice he obeyed. He began to trot proudly toward his master. Bill Long rounded third.

"Drat that dog!" wailed Fat. Bill crossed the plate. "I protest that run, Mr. Umpire," yelled the irate Harve. "It's a blocked ball."

Bill lay down and rolled over and over. "'Tain't blocked yet," he gurgled: "it's still

movin'. My, oh my! What luck! I thought Hec was your mascot, Joe?"

Stephen Mayhew tried to control his own laughter. "I may know the rules, Joe," he gasped, "but this play is up to you. Is Bill safe, or does he go back to second?"

"Runs count," declared Joe promptly. "Score's 8 to 7."

"Thought you'd say that, but I'm going to order Hec off the field."

"Order me to take him," begged Harve. "Order me!" But Tug was already leading his disgraced pet away by one ear. "Play ball!" commanded Mr. Steve.

Alex had seen an even chance for victory changed into what looked like sure defeat. But now he gritted his teeth, determined to give the best there was in him. He put all he had into the next four pitches and nothing had ever sounded more grateful to him than the umpire's "Batter out!" He came in from the box wiping his hot face on his sleeve.

"We've got to pull this game out of the wreck, Joe," he sighed.

"We're going to, ole hoss. Don't you get any other idea in your head."

"Who's up?"

"Tug."

Alex wanted to groan. Only his loyalty to Tug prevented it. The little fellow couldn't hit. He was on the nine only because he completed the number, and he knew it.

"What'll I do, Joe?" he asked, as he picked up a bat.

"Stick your old bean in front of the ball," urged Harve.

Joe, too, grinned. "Slug it out, old top," he ordered cheerfully. "You can do it."

It made Tug feel better, even though he appreciated the impossibility of the order. He walked out to the plate waving his bat. Jack Swift, who had already struck him out three times, waved a welcome. Tug scuffed his feet into the dust and poised his bat.—Then he decided that the best thing to do

was to act threatening. It might affect the pitcher's nerve. He thought that, because he knew it would disturb him, were he in Jack's place.

Even as Swift wound up carelessly, the bat was still doing gymnastics. The ball came. Tug saw it, tried to check the motion of his war club, tried to bring it back into position from which to bring it forward. Then the accident occurred. The ball crashed against the bat and rolled feebly toward third. For a fraction of a second, Tug stood dumbfounded. "Run!" screamed Nelse. "Run, you ossified prune!"

Tug ran, ran as hard as he could. Ten feet from first he dived headlong for the rock which served for a bag.

"Whatcher slide for?" demanded Nelse. "You were safe a mile. Good bunt. You fooled 'em."

Tug grinned sheepishly as he got to his feet. "Do I get credit for a hit?" he asked.

"No, an error," chuckled Nelse. "On your toes, now; we need this run."

Stan came to bat. Joe ran out and whispered

to Nelse, who nodded. Tug looked at the two, bewildered. "Run when I say," ordered Nelse. "I'll do the brain work."

That was the sort of order Tug Wilson wanted. As Swift made ready to pitch, he looked at Nelse, but the coach shook his head. Tug knew he was to stay where he was. But the next time Jack shot a ball for the plate, Nelse let out a yell like an Indian in pursuit of a toothsome dog. Head down, Tug legged it for second. He thought he was stealing a base; he had no idea that he was one end of a hit and run play. All that saved him was the fact that Stan's grounder went toward first.

Tug, perched on second, had only one regret,—he was too far from Nelse. He looked appealingly at him but Nelse only shook his head. Tug began to feel like a sailor adrift on a lonesome shingle. He wanted to get home but he couldn't see how it was to be done. It seemed even more hopeless as he watched Swift strike Alex out. Then he saw Dick Hunt coming to the bat. Dick, most probably,

would do something or other. Tug thought he'd stick around second and make sure.

Dick, with the tying run on second, had visions of a rosier sort. Here was his chance. A home run would mean the game for the Wolves. It would mean much to the fellows to win; it would mean far more to him to win for them. He swung at the first ball with all his might. And he missed it by a couple of feet.

Maybe, he felt, it would be better to play it safe. A two bagger would bring Tug home with the tying run. Joe Lowell would then be up. Joe would bring him home from second with a clean single. He compromised between hope and safety by deciding to smash out a three bagger. "Strike two!" announced Mr. Steve.

Dick shook his head. This wouldn't do at all. He had heard Harve's groan at the umpire's announcement. The fellows were counting on him; they were disappointed because he had not already delivered the goods. He looked at the pitcher, saw him shake his head. Jack was calling for another

signal. Dick decided that he was going to tempt him with a wide one. Maybe! But he was not to be fooled, with the game hanging on him. He gripped his bat firmly.

"Run on anything, Tug," yelled Nelse. "Two out. Drive 'er, Dick!"

The ball came. It was wide of the plate. Dick almost had time to draw a quick breath of relief. He had outguessed Jack Swift. He could not be tempted. But just then the ball broke. Like a flash it darted in. He tried to swing.

"Three strikes!" declared Mr. Steve; "batter out!"

"Wow!" yelled Bill Long. "Yow! Yow! Three cheers for the Wolf Patrol, fellows!"

Dick Hunt heard but dimly. The Foxes had won 8 to 7. He had failed in the first crisis they had put him in. Slowly he turned and walked away from the plate.

CHAPTER VII

HARVE TO THE RESCUE

Nelse Pease stood on the end of the spring-board which reached out over the swimming hole. Below him, half a dozen lads were visible; while on the bank, the rest of the two patrols waited their turns to plunge into the lake. "Go on, wade in, Dick," he called. "If you tried it from here, you couldn't hit the water."

Dick Hunt did his best to laugh. The other Wolves might take the Fox victory as more or less of a joke, but to him it was a different matter. In spite of all Joe and Alex had already said, he felt that he had failed at the critical moment, had proved himself of much less than no use, had been unable to deliver the goods when the Patrol had called to him. Harve Foster saw the quick wince as Nelson's shot struck home and, with a laugh, dashed at the

springboard. "See if you can hit it yourself, Nelse," he hooted.

There was a yell as Fat took-off from the center of the board but, instead of diving high, he threw his heavy body headlong in a flying tackle and, catching Nelse around the waist, went into the lake with him with a mighty splash. "Don't you chaps care what chances you take?" gasped Bill Long; "Fat might have killed him."

Joe laughed. "Guess you don't know all there is to know about that pair of ducks. Mr. Steve trained 'em. Want to see the Two Marvelous Mayhew Seals-Count 'Em-perform?"

"Sure! Trot out anything in the way of a laugh."

"Come out of that, you two wharf rats!" ordered Joe; "you've got to give a show."

Fat came in with the clean-cut stroke of the racing crawl, Nelse close in his wake. "All right," he agreed. "It never hurt either of us to be modest."

"Throw us a jack knife," suggested Eb. "I've been trying to learn that dive." Nelse grinned. "It's very simple," he said. "Get out there, Fatness."

Eb wondered just why Harve took such trouble to get his feet and distance just so. He always had supposed that jack knife was done easily and quickly by experts. He began to believe that the Wolves over-estimated the prowess of their specialists. But, before he could completely form the idea, Nelse darted out on the board, sprang leap-frogged cleanly over Fat and went down like a plummet, missing the end of the board by six inches. Before Eb could gasp, Fat was disappearing among the bubbles.

"Wow!" he yelled and sat down. "I hope this is a six reel show."

What the pair did not do in the way of fancy double diving, the Foxes had never heard of. How big Harve Foster could be so graceful, was a mystery to them which was not explained until the two Patrols insisted that Mr. Steve show them what diving really was. Then even Nelse and Harve sat down. "Maybe we can learn some day," sighed

Nelse. "Ain't he the little Kellerman cutie, though!"

"Wish he'd teach us," said Bill enviously. "You fellows don't appreciate your luck."

"No!" Stan chuckled. "No," he repeated, "we haven't one bit of use for that man. Beyond dying for him any old time, we wouldn't do a thing for him. Most of the time he's just in our way."

"Why don't you Foxes come up and establish a camp like ours," suggested Nick. "There's room enough round the lake and it would be a heap of fun to have you here."

"If wishes were Camp Lowells," admitted Bill, "we have a couple of 'em on the half shell. Maybe, some day, we'll be able to buy a tent and do something of the sort. Just now our treasury looks as if a he-elephant had sat on it."

"Why don't you talk it over with the Scout Commissioner," suggested Mr. Steve quietly.

Bill grinned sheepishly. "I've done just that," he owned, "and I got just what I expected."

"What was that?"

"Got told that, if the Foxes wanted a camp, the best way for them to get one was for them to get busy and earn one."

"Mr. Nelson believes in you fellows earning your fun," Mr. Steve said. "Reckon he's right about it, too. You appreciate a thing far more when you've done something worth while for it."

"Maybe so," agreed Bill; "most probably you're right. But we could appreciate a nice little shack over on that point right now, if Santa Claus would stuff it in our sock."

"You ought at least to be willing to hang up the sock, Bill," laughed Mr. Mayhew.

"I'll nail both mine on the spring board and walk home barefoot, if you think the bait'll work," he retorted. "It would be a fine thing for the Wolves to have us as neighbors. Remind you chaps all the time that there was something right handy which could put it all over you at any old time."

"For that," declared Joe, "you get yours. Come on, Harve; duck him." And, before the Foxes could rally to his rescue, Bill went sailing out over the water to land with a spank which made him howl. "Next lady?" offered Fat. "Little aeroplane trip free of cost. Come on in, Eb; the water's fine." He poised an instant, then went headlong in a flying sailor.

It needed but little persuasion, when the two Patrols were back at camp, to have the Foxes remain for supper. Mr. Steve was as whole hearted in his invitation as were any of the boys, and assured Bill that it made no difference what time the Mayhew cars reached Gillfield that evening. But one thing that Bill did insist on was that members of his Patrol be detailed as assistants to Wolves who had to do any of the work preparatory to the meal.

"You can do all of it, if it will save you from heart break," Harve offered generously; "I've no special yearning to set the table. I'd much rather sit in the hammock and finish the center-piece I'm embroidering. Come on, Eb, and I'll show you how to wreck China."

If luncheon and the afternoon had been fun for them all, supper and the evening spent about the camp fire, with Stephen Mayhew as story-teller-in-chief, was no anti-climax. The Wolves were as sorry as the Foxes when it came time for the start for Gillfield, and that was saying a great deal. "Don't know how we're going to do it," Bill Long declared as he took his place in one of the cars, "but we fellows are going to have a camp near you fellows or bust."

"We might be able to stand you as neighbors," admitted Nelse; "but we'd sure hate to have you bust all over any of our pet scenery. Whatever you do, don't get reckless and come up again when the skating gets good. We can lick you at hockey."

"You can have the chance any old time," yelled Eb.

"All right; week after next—if the ice is good."

"And that ends that part," sighed Fat, as the cars disappeared into the night. "Good game, I'll say!"

"Would have been, if I hadn't struck out," muttered Dick.

"What's that?" Harve wheeled around. "Say,

forget it! I wasn't speaking of that near ball game. We got licked and that's that. Even if it had been your fault, what's the dif? If you hadn't had hard luck, some of the rest of us might have. Hec wasn't any special help to us."

"But Hec didn't mean to do anything wrong."

"Did you mean to strike out?"

"Of course not."

"Then whatcher tryin' to give yourself such a rotten time for? If everybody made a hit every time he went to bat, a ball game would never end and no one would get a chance to sleep. That game's ended and here's where I begin to pound my ear. Anybody else for the hay?"

"Guess we all are about ready," acknowledged Joe. "Some day! Let's have that crowd up again before the summer's over."

"Betcher!" agreed Stan. "They're all right. Wouldn't be half bad if they should put something across and get a camp of their own. Hi, Dick! Where you goin'?"

"I'm not very sleepy yet and I like the moonlight

on the water. Guess I'll take a canoe and go for a paddle. I don't get much of this sort of thing, you know; I'm only here week ends."

"Bug house!" grunted Fat.

"Let him alone," cautioned Joe. "He's kinder sore over losing that game. Let him find himself."

"He can, for all of me," assented Harve. "Say, Dick," he yelled after the disappearing boy, "when you come in, come softly and don't light anything. If you spoil my beauty sleep, I'll fix you so naps won't help you at all."

But going to sleep instantly, when several companionable fellows are in the same camp, is quite a different thing from saying you are going to do so. Harve Foster was no sooner in his bunk than he discovered that he had a lot of important ideas which had to be aired immediately. There was not only what had happened during the past few hours but what was going to be made to happen the next day. It would never do to wake up facing another morning and afternoon without a complete program to be disregarded.

It was Nick who protested at last. "Gee!" he yawned. "I'd most rather hear you snore, Fat. It's almost eleven."

"Dick ought to be in soon," suggested Joe, a trifle anxiously. "Don't suppose he upset?"

"What if he has?" mumbled Alex. "He can swim."

"Might get a cramp," suggested Fat. "I almost had one—"

"Oh, dry up!" advised Nick.

"I'm dried up already," retorted Harve. "Guess I'll get a drink."

"Put a pail of water under your pillow and go to sleep," Nick turned over and pulled the blankets about his ears.

But Harve, who was now wide awake again, decided that he wanted, not only a drink, but a hand-kerchief which, he believed, was in the bottom of his pack. He got the first and started to rummage for the other. Beyond falling over a chair, he was comparatively quiet until he started to paw the assorted treasures out of that pack. It was then

that Alex hurled a shoe. Fat promptly gave notice that a hit had been scored.

"What if it did?" demanded Alex. "Your skin's tougher than boiled owl. Go back to bed and shut up."

"But my leg's broke," groaned Harve, "busted completely in two just above the wish bone."

"Oh, shut up!"

"Hit the hay!"

"Go out and tell it to Hec!"

But Harve had other ideas. He recalled that water bucket by the window. Somehow there seemed a pleasant association between its contents and the warm nest Alex was inhabiting. Therefore he stumbled toward the bucket.

At the window he came to a sudden halt. "Holy catfish!" he exclaimed. "The roof's blown off a mountain. Say, fellows, there's a big fire somewhere!"

"Oh, go back to bed! It's the moon."

"Choke him!"

"Everybody out!"

There was no mistaking the excitement in Harve's shout. Seven pairs of bare feet hit the floor with a thud. "It's near here," he said; "over Bray's way. Maybe his house."

Already he was dashing for the door. The rest were crowding after him. They, too, saw the dull, red glow growing brighter each instant. "It's a big one," declared Nick.

"It is over by the Bray place," agreed Tug.

"Everybody dress!" Joe's order was sharp, and they whirled from the door to grab their clothes. "Shirts, breeches, coats, and shoes," he went on; don't stop for anything else. Patrol may be needed."

There was no chatter now. Training in orderliness told. No light was needed. Each knew where he had left his clothes. Joe, as usual, was the first ready. Darting out onto the veranda, he looked at the fire again. There was no question about it's being an ugly one. He could see the smoke and, against it, the reflection of angry flames. "It's on the Bray place," he affirmed: "hurry. Form Patrol!"

Almost before he had spoken, two joined him; others followed. He began the roll call. Tug Wilson answered his name as he came out headlong. "Single file," snapped Joe; "run!"

"Where's Hunt?" demanded Nick, as he leaped the steps.

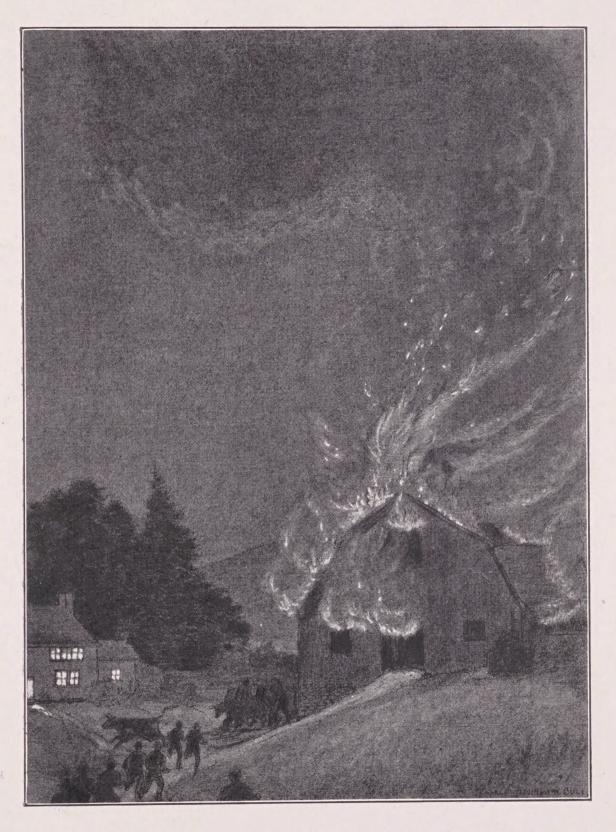
"Probably there now. If not, he'll come as soon as he finds we've gone."

At the head of the line, Joe swung into the path which led to the Bray farm. It was dark in the woods, but he set the pace at full speed. He knew enough about fires to appreciate that, up here in the hills, every particle of help would be sorely needed. He had only two fears; the first that some one would turn an ankle in the rough going, the real one that they would arrive too late to be of help.

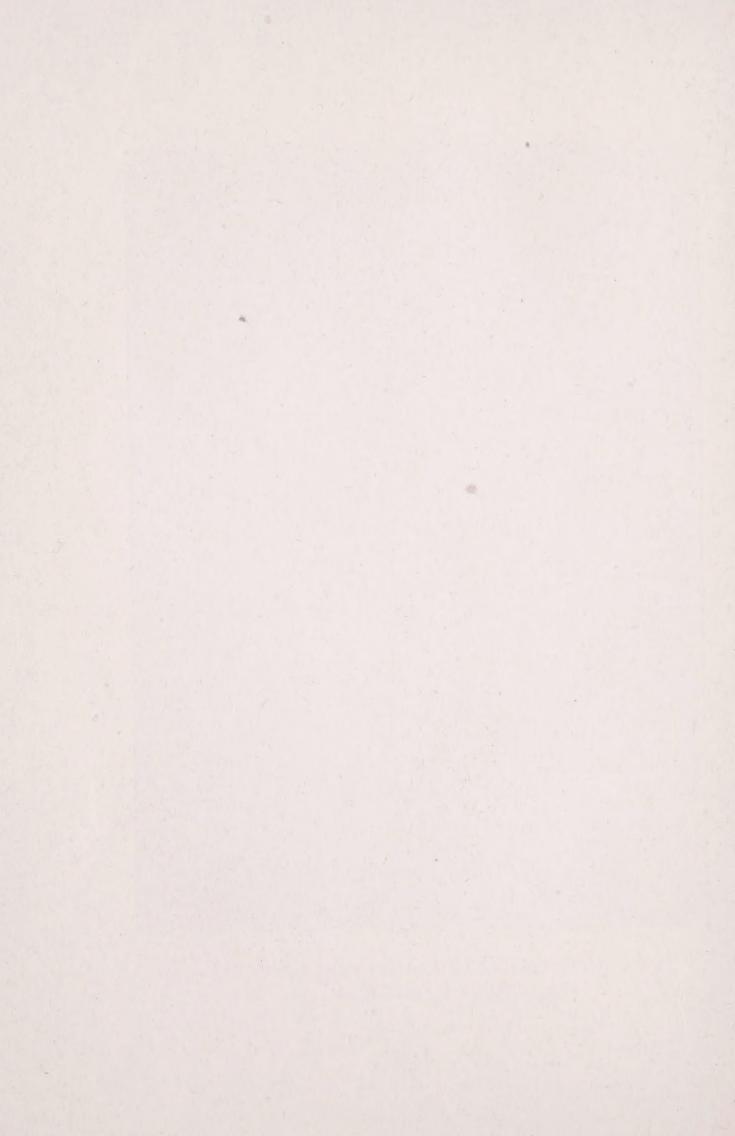
The Wolves had made good time before but never such speed as now. As they emerged into the first field they caught a full view of what was happening. Nelse Pease yelled, but Joe's jaw set the firmer.

"What can we do?" panted Ned.

"Run!"



"THE WOLVES VAULTED THE LAST FENCE AND WHIRLED INTO THE FARMYARD"



They obeyed. The Patrol formation was broken. It was each at topmost speed as they rushed the meadow. Great puffs of smoke, like balloons, came from the barn roof. Then, with a roar, a vast sheet of flame burst into the air and it became as light as day. On the road they saw men running toward the Bray house. From a distance came the beat of galloping hoofs. The neighbors were running to the rescue. The Wolves vaulted the last fence and whirled into the farm yard.

"What shall we do?" panted Joe.

The gasping, choking man to whom he spoke shook his head. "Got my horses out," he said; "saved two cows. Rest will go."

"Where are they?"

"Shed under south corner. Smoke's awful. Keep away."

"But they'll be burned."

Mr. Bray stiffened. "I'll try for another," he said.

"Two of us will go," volunteered Joe.

"No." He started for the blazing building once more.

Alex Cotton stepped forward. "Ned and I know fire work," he said.

Joe looked at the two a second. "All right," he agreed. "We came to help."

They darted into the smoke in the wake of the farmer. "Go back," he yelled, as he saw them.

"We're all right; you lead."

There was neither time nor breath for argument. Ahead they could hear the doomed animals. Ned felt the searing heat of a burst of flame and threw his arm over his face. "Take off your coat and be ready to cover your head," ordered Alex. "Wish we could wet 'em."

Bray darted into the barn. The smoke was stifling but, as yet, the flame had not eaten downward. The two boys followed. Ahead they heard the man wrenching at the stanchions. "Here!" he cried; "lead this one out. Maybe I can free another."

Ned grabbed at the halter, jerked the frightened cow around, gave her a slap and a yank and started her for the door. Five feet and she baulked. He threw his coat over her eyes. She moved again but a snail's pace. "Joe!" he yelled. "Oh, Joe!"

A moment more and Lowell came dashing through the smoke. "Take her," gasped Ned; "I'm goin' back."

Alex brought out the next animal. Little Tug took her from him. The Patrol was relaying them into the open. Some farmer took them from the last boy and drove them to safety. Five were rescued before Ned collapsed as he led out the sixth. Joe, giving the cow a slap on the flank, dropped the halter to grab his friend. With one sweeping swing he had him on his shoulder. A moment more and he staggered out into the untainted air. A woman ran up. "Put him here," she said; "he'll be all right in a minute. But don't you go back there."

"I've got to; Alex is still in there."

"Bill Bray shouldn't er let you go."

But Joe did not stop to hear what Bray should or

should not have permitted. He knew the farmer was still in there with Alex, and he knew Ned had stayed as long as it was possible for a Scout to stay. Therefore he was afraid of what already might have happened "Harve!" he yelled. "Oh, Harve!"

"Whatcher want?" The big fellow was at his side in an instant.

"Alex out?"

"Haven't seen him."

"Come on, then."

Without another word they darted into the smoke, heads low, holding their breath. They found the doorway. "I'll go," said Harve. But Lowell was at his heels as they both plunged through.

It was thick and the heat terrific. Fat winced for an instant. Then he heard the rattle of a chain to his left. He knew seconds counted as hours. He started for the sound. Ten feet and he collided with a staggering, gasping man.

For an instant he steadied him; then, "Take him out, Joe," he commanded. "I'll find Alex."

Lowell knew there was no time to argue. He

knew Harve could stand the smoke but a moment. Grabbing Mr. Bray by the arm, he rushed out. But his chief thought was to send Stan in to help Fat.

Harve Foster, alone in the smoke, fought forward with a gameness he never knew he possessed. His one idea was to find his friend before he, himself, dropped. He knew Alex must have been with Mr. Bray. Therefore he was going in the right direction. But he could go but very few steps further and still be able to make the return trip.

It seemed miles instead of feet, hours instead of seconds, before he found him. Alex was stumbling toward a little window through which he could never have crawled. Fat clutched at him but Alex was stupid from the smoke. Harve got behind him, started to rush him out. Alex went a few feet, stumbled. They both went down.

Harve knew their situation was desperate. He scrambled up, picked Alex up in his arms and made one more rush. He blundered through the door in some way; then twenty feet more and he fell again. But, as he went down, he yelled with what breath he had left. There was a rush and, as strong hands gripped his shoulders, he had an idea that some one had begun to swing him in a hammock above a smoking, blazing pit. Then he had no ideas at all.

Five minutes later a dull, thudding crash half awakened him. He thought it must be the Fourth of July. Great spouts of sparks were swirling into the air. It was as if a million Roman candles had collided with half as many angry pinwheels. Then, indistinctly, he heard some one say something about a roof falling and he remembered there had been a fire somewhere or other. "Lie still," commanded Tug Wilson's voice; "you'll be all right pretty soon."

But Harve, finding he could breathe something which seemed less thick than pea soup, sat up. In front of him was a group of men who were doing nothing but watch the settling ruin. To one side he saw the equally idle Wolves. "Can't any one do anything, Tug?" he asked.

"Guess not. It's all over. They say the house would have gone, if the wind hadn't been the other way."

"Did they save all the stock?"

"Most of it," was the nervous reply. "Better sit still some more. You can see from here and you must be full of smoke still."

"Then I'll move round and make a draft so the smoke'll blow out." He got his feet under him, swayed a second, then shook himself like a Newfoundland pup just out of a river. "All right now," he stated. "I wouldn't go into a place like that again for six ice cream sodas and two milk shakes."

"You did an awfully brave thing," stated Tug soberly.

"I wouldn't have, if I'd stopped to think," Fat confessed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ABSENT SCOUT

SLOWLY, at first, the flames seemed to settle; then, almost as quickly as the sky had been turned to scarlet, darkness returned and only a glowing, crimson pit told where the huge barn had stood. Joe saw Mrs. Bray, her lips trembling, pat her husband's shoulder; saw the man's back stiffen, heard his low-voiced "'S all right, Mother"; saw them both try to smile as another neighbor came up to offer sympathy. It was the sort of courage which appealed most to him. He wanted to tell them so but did not know how. Instead, he 'edged up to the farmer and asked quietly if there were anything he could do.

"Do?" broke out Mr. Bray. "Should think you boys had done enough. I'm thankful you're all alive. Foster had a close call. He's all grit."

"If you mean the big, fat chap, broke in another farmer, "you haven't half said it. I've watched these boys down to their camp, Bray, and all I got to say is that I'm goin' home and tell my three boys and get them made Boy Scouts."

"Send 'em down to camp, sir," suggested Nelse, "and we'll tell 'em how to begin. What started the fire, Mr. Bray?"

"Wish I knew."

"Been out there with a lantern or a pipe this evenin'?" It was a bearded farmer from far up the road who asked.

"Don't smoke, Ben," retorted Mr. Bray. "Didn't go to the barn after I done the chores, either."

"Somethin' started it," declared the man soberly.

"Or some one," growled Bray.

"What's that! Whatcher mean?"

"Maybe nothing."

"Think it's arson? Think some one's got it in for ye?" The farmers were crowding close now.

"Bill!" It was Mrs. Bray who spoke and her voice was pleading. The big man looked at her,

then shrugged his shoulders. "Reckon I'm too stirred up to think straight to-night," he muttered and turned away.

But the group he left was far from satisfied. He had given them something to think about which was of vital interest to every man who owned a farm for miles around. They knew Bill Bray and they could not believe he had an enemy in the world. If some one had fired his barn, none of their property was safe. For a moment they stared at each other questioningly, then, as if afraid that one would give the answer all dreaded, drifted apart.

But Bray himself had not gone far before he heard an impatient hail. Again he turned and hurried to where his rescued cattle were standing in a fence corner. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Matter enough!" came the snarling reply.

"Ain't goin' to stand here all night, herdin' yer cows."

The voice sounded familar, but Mr. Bray peered more sharply to make sure. He could hardly

credit either ears or eyes. It was Hanson. "Don't expect you to," he said. "But I do thank you for your kindness. Hi, one of you Scouts!"

Hanson snorted as Mr. Bray's call rang out. "Some time some o' yer fat heads'll learn to leave them boys be."

"What do you mean? They've done good work to-night."

"Reckon, if yer satisfied, I be. Wouldn't call burnin' one o' my barns good work, though."

"What's that!" The question fairly crackled. Hanson shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Better learn who set that fire," he growled. "I ain't goin' to tend these cows no more; goin' home."

"You wait!"

"Ain't workin' fer you." Hanson turned on his heel and, without another word, hurried to the road where he had left his horse hitched to the fence.

Mr. Bray took one quick step but, before he could take another, two boys raced up to him. "Did you call for some of us?" asked Nick.

"Yes. Want some one to drive the cattle into the pasture. No other place for 'em now." He studied the boys for a second. "Hear anything Hanson said?" he asked suddenly.

"Hanson? Didn't know he was here."

"Um! Neither did I-until a minute ago."

"I saw him drive up just as we got here," volunteered Field. "Was going to watch the cows, as you people brought them out, but he came along and said he'd do it, and for me to get back with the fellows where I was needed. What's biting him now?"

"You saw him drive up, you say?"

"Yes, sir. He was licking his old bag of bones for fair."

"Which way'd he come from?"

"That." Ned pointed up the road.

"Lives that way." He was thoughtful for a moment. "All you boys from camp came together, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"All but one," corrected Nick. "Don't forget Dick, Ned."

"That's so. Say, I haven't seen him, either." His voice became suddenly anxious. "Wonder if anything could have happened to him? He left camp," he explained, "and went out in a canoe. He's only here for week ends and wants to make the most of his time. Guess I'd better ask Joe if he's seen him."

"Is that the boy who had trouble with Hanson last week?

"Yes."

"That accounts for it."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Not a thing worth bothering your heads over," declared Mr. Bray forcefully. "Only you find Dick and forget what I've asked you. I'll get some one else to take care of the cows."

For a second the two boys looked at each other, then sped in search of Lowell. "What's he so interested in Dick Hunt about?" queried Nick. "Search me! Suppose there's anything fishy about this fire and they suspect him?"

"What'd they suspect him for. He's never—"
Nick gulped. It flashed over him with sickening suddenness that Dick Hunt was the one boy in all Gillfield whose past would lay him open to instant suspicion. "Dick's all right."

"Bet he is!" declared Ned with equal loyalty.

"Mr. Bray would never suspect him of any funny business. Our game's to find him quick. He must be here somewhere. Couldn't help but see the fire and come. There's Joe."

But their eager questions brought no satisfactory response. Dick had not been seen, either by the Patrol leader or any of the rest. "Mr. Bray told us to find him," explained Nick. "What'll we do?"

"Why does he want him?" asked Joe.

"Don't know. Just told us to find him, that's all."

Joe had no reputation for slow thinking. His face became clouded and his teeth set tight. "Get

the fellows together, Nick," he ordered; "I'm going to see Mr. Bray."

Ten minutes later he rejoined the Patrol, his heavy frown having given place to a puzzled, anxious expression. The farmer had only done his best to thank him for all he and the rest had done, and had commanded him to forget all about his conversation with Nick and Ned. "I'd trust any of you Scouts anywhere, anytime," was all Joe had been able to make him say. "So would any of the rest of us farmers round the lake. Young Hunt might have gotten upset in that canoe. You'd better find him; we don't want any more trouble up this way to-night."

There was nothing more they could do at the farm. Joe looked from one to another. "Come on," he commanded; "let's find Dick." And, without another word, he led them back along the path into the woods and toward the camp.

As Joe at last leaped the steps of the veranda, a figure rose from the hammock swung to face the lake. "Thought you fellows had gotten homesick and gone back to Gillfield," said Dick Hunt.

The Patrol slid to a stop behind Joe. "Where've you been?"

"Why didn't you come up?"

"Didn't you see the fire?"

"What fire?"

"The Bray barn."

"The Bray barn! I didn't know about it."

"Didn't you see the flames? Where were you?"

"Paddled up to the head of the lake. Was it bad?"

"Bad enough to nearly burn Harve," declared the still excited Tug. "You should have been there, Dick."

"Gee, but I'm sorry I wasn't! There was a loon up there and I tried to float the canoe close to it."

"Don't see why you didn't see the flames," muttered Ned. "Whole sky was red."

"That big hill cuts off the end of the lake from the Bray place," Joe explained. "Dick wouldn't see the flames from where he was. How long have you been back?"

"'Bout twenty minutes, I guess. But tell me what happened. That's the interesting part."

It was Nelse who launched into an account of what Harve and Alex had done and Dick listened open mouthed, until he had finished. Then, rising, he walked up to Foster and held out his hand. "It was fine!" he exclaimed. "All you fellows seem able to do the brave thing at the right minute. I hope my chance will come some day and that I'll meet it like a Wolf."

Joe and Ned looked at each other and the latter nodded joyously. "Let's turn in," he suggested, with a happy laugh. "No one's got to sing me to sleep; I'm all in."

"I'm with you," sighed Harve. "My little bed's been calling to me."

"Get a drink before you squash it flat this time, old smoke consumer," suggested Nelse. "If you discover another fire, and pull any more grandstand stuff, every one will know you set the thing so you could advertise yourself."

"Sure!" grinned Fat. "But next time I'll see that the movie machine's on the job in time."

But it was harder to get to sleep than they had supposed. Alex was not the only one whose cough proved they were still feeling the effects of the smoke, nor was Tug the only one who wanted to live over again Harve's bravery. The little fellow completely forgot he was the only Medal of Honor Scout in the district, and he was too excited over the thought that the Patrol had added to its record to go to sleep until long after the rest were quiet.

They were hardly through breakfast, however, before the whole affair of the previous night was once more made the center of interest. Mr. Bray came striding out of the woods and up to the steps where the boys were sitting. "Good morning, all of you," he said heartily. "Wanted to make sure none of you was the worse for last night."

"Every one of us is able to sit up and eat another breakfast this minute, sir," grinned Harve. "Come up and have a chair. Bully of you to think of us."

The farmer looked at him keenly, and a slow smile twisted the corners of his mouth. "I'd hardly forget you and Cotton," he retorted. "I owe the whole of you more than I can ever repay."

"You don't owe us anything," Joe declared. "You and Mrs. Bray have been mighty nice to the Wolf Patrol and, if we have been able to show our appreciation, we're some happy."

"I'll tell the world!" echoed Nelse heartily. "And as for old Fat's part in the party, what's troubling us all is how he ever managed to get a cow out without stopping to milk her."

"I'll tell you," chuckled Harve, above the laughter. "I don't know how to milk."

"Come up this evening and I'll teach you," offered Mr. Bray.

"Not on your life! I have to do all the work

down here; I'm not going to be nurse maid for any kindfaced cow. How's Mrs. Bray?"

"All right and just as grateful as I am. We've sorter been talking things over," he went on, more slowly," and we've kinder decided we'd like to do something for you boys, if you'll let us."

"You do enough now," said Joe.

"We like to. What we'd like better still is to have you feel our place is a sorter home for you."

"We do now," declared Stan. "Ned spends most of his time there eating Mrs. Bray's cookies."

"And that's all right, too," said the farmer. "But it's not what I mean. You see it's sorter like this: we haven't any boys of our own and we like boys. The house is big and there is a big front room upstairs which looks out over the lake. Now, what we'd sorter like to have you do is about like this: we'll fix that room up any way you say and it's to be your room any time and all the time, but specially in winter when Camp Lowell isn't open or comfortable. You're to have that

room, and any of you can come and stay there as long as you want."

"Wow!"

"Say, Mr. Bray!"

"But we don't deserve anything like that, sir," confessed Joe, his face red.

"Neither do we," said the farmer, with a smile, "so we'll call it a bargain."

"But it means hockey and skating and everythin'," gasped Tug. "It means we can come to the lake all the year round."

"Means the Brays want you to, youngster."

"Look here," shouted Nelse, leaping to his feet; "what are we just talking for. Everybody up! Three cheers for Mr. and Mrs. Bray!"

They were given, then three more and several other threes. The boys could hardly control their joy. They had never thought of having winter quarters at the lake. Even now they could not wholly realize their good luck. "Seems to me," ventured Dick, "that we'd better go to the farm and thank Mrs. Bray, too."

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"Some suggestion!" agreed Nelse. "What say, Joe?"

"I certainly want to."

"She'll be glad to see you, now or at any time," agreed the farmer, then turned to Dick. "Didn't see you at the fire last night, did we?"

"No. Didn't know there was one until the fellows came home."

"Must be some sound sleeper," observed Mr. Bray casually.

"It wasn't that, sir, nor because I wouldn't have liked a chance to do my share. But I was up at the head of the lake in a canoe and didn't even see the flames."

"Were you alone?"

There was the merest note of anxiety in the question, and Joe and Ned were quick to catch it. The Patrol Leader sat suddenly erect. "Dick doesn't get a chance to come up except for week ends, as I said," he explained. "He tried to crowd seven days fun into two. He was chasing a loon."

"Oh!"

"Just my luck to be doing something foolish like that, too," threw in Dick. "From now on I'm going to stick to the crowd."

"I would," agreed Mr. Bray soberly, and got to his feet. "You all coming with me?"

"We sure are!"

"You can't lose us. We want to cheer Mrs. Bray."

But, as they started through the woods, Ned and Joe fell behind the jubilant crowd. "Say," Field at last exploded, "what's goin' on?"

"I don't know," Joe confessed, shaking his head slowly. "I wish Dick had been with the bunch."

"You don't think any one would be chump enough to think he had anything to do with setting that fire, do you?"

"It doesn't seem so. But it does seem as if Mr. Bray was trying to give him, or us, some sort of hint without telling us anything."

"But he was out in the canoe."

"We know that. We know him, too. But, while we've all done our best to forget Dick's past, other

people may remember it. I won't even suspect that any one suspects him now, but I'm going to make it my business hereafter to see none has a chance to do anything of the sort. You or I will stick right with him, Ned, and don't let any of the crowd guess anything, especially Dick. It would break his heart if he guessed any one mistrusted him."

"It sure would! You bet I'll do all I can. I'm keen for him. He's a good chap and as square as the day is long."

"You're right. But he's awfully sensitive."

"Don't blame him for being so."

"Neither do I. We would be, if we'd gone through what he has. Come on, let's catch up with the rest before Harve and Tug get curious."

They found Fat interested only in evading Mr. Bray's hilarious invitation to begin milking lessons that evening. Ned had never thought the big man could be so full of fun. But Joe saw there was still a worried expression behind the twinkle in his eyes, and was decidedly glad when he found Tug walking close to Dick Hunt. Of them all, he knew Tug

to be the one who felt things first, and he believed the little fellow had sensed some sort of trouble and was already offering his protection to the one he felt might need it most. And, knowing Tug, he fell into step with Alex, sure that his own load had been lightened.

The fact that several of the neighboring farmers were gathered about the ruins of the barn rather quieted the greetings they had planned for Mrs. Bray. The men listened with good-natured approval and every one of them had words of congratulation for Harve and Alex; yet, when they had had their say, they returned to where the barn had stood. Joe watched in silence, then walked to Mr. Bray.

"Do you want us to help hunt for anything?" he asked.

"You wouldn't find anything. I don't believe that fire was set; I didn't believe so last night. I think they're over-anxious about their own barns."

"Is there really any talk about that fire being set?" Joe's question was calm, but his eyes told of a different emotion.

"If there is, it's all foolishness," declared Mr. Bray promptly. "There's only one man within miles who hates me, and I wouldn't suspect him of such a thing. Anyway, he was here."

"Do you mean-"

"I didn't say any name," broke in Mr. Bray sharply, "and I'm not going to; neither are you. But the thing I do want to say to you, so long as Mr. Steve isn't here, is that everything's all right."

"We aren't even going to talk about such a thing, Joe. It isn't worth it. Now forget the whole thing and go ahead with your fun. You can't do anything more to help me, and I'm ready to do all that is necessary to take care of everything. Not even you and I are going to talk about who might have set that fire. It's over and that's all there is to it."

The boy recognized both the finality and the kindness of the statement. But he would have given much to have found Mr. Steve sitting on the steps when they got back to Camp Lowell. His own mind was so confused that he wanted to straighten

Master. He would not hesitate to act could he see his way even half clearly, but now it was all fog ahead and he could not tell the mountain from the mole hill. All he was certain of was that he was imagining other people were imagining something about Dick Hunt. The more he thought about it, the more absurd it seemed. Certainly Mr. Bray was right; the thing to do was to forget the whole affair.

But he found his decision difficult to put in practice. In spite of himself he found himself watching Dick, even when they all went swimming. The one thing which gave him real satisfaction, though, was that Dick showed no sign of being conscious that anything out of the ordinary was in the air. Joe had never seen even Nelse have more fun than did Dick during the whole of that long, bright July day. It was as if he were doing his best to crowd all he had missed in the past into a glorious present.

When night came Dick was, according to Nelse,

"still going on the High." "I ought to go down to Gillfield this evening," he owned, "but, so long as I'm on the doorstep when the janitor opens the bank, Mr. Nelson won't mind. Guess I'll beat it down early in the morning."

"Some hoof!" declared Nelse.

"Hike it before sunrise."

"They tell me it is nice," chuckled Pease; "I'll take their word for it, though."

"Might get a ride with a milkman," suggested Alex. "Should think you could fix it with one of 'em to take you down every Monday."

"I need the exercise. Don't get as much as you fellows."

"You will, when you come to stay. We'll attend to that."

"Guess we've all had enough lately. What say we turn in early so Dick can get some sleep?"

They were all ready enough to follow Joe's suggestion, nor was there a boy stirring when Dick Hunt crept out of his blankets before dawn. Yet, three hours later all Camp Lowell was wide eyed. Mr. Bray had stopped on his way home to tell them that the Belknap barn, on the road to Gillfield, had been burned to the ground three hours before.

CHAPTER IX

THE TRAIL OF THE FIRE BUG

"THE thing for us to do," declared Nelse, "is to hike for Belknap's and see if we can do anything."

"Sure is!" echoed Harve. "If this sort of stuff keeps up, we'd better organize a fire department."

"Isn't anything to joke about, Fat," retorted Joe.
"I don't like the look of it."

"Neither do I. That's why I say it's up to us to do something. Let's start by doing what Nelse suggests. He has to be right some time; maybe this is the time."

Joe considered a moment. "Maybe it is," he agreed. "Of course the Patrol wants to do what it can to help."

"Some one's coming down the road," cried Ned.
"Listen!"

Almost before they could turn, Stephen Mayhew's runabout was bouncing to a stop at the side of the camp. "Hello, fellows!" he called.

For once there was lack of hilarity in the answering chorus. Their glances were fixed on the man at Mr. Mayhew's side. Ned turned to Joe, his eyes wide with sudden fear. "It's Chief O'Connor," he gasped.

"You been stealin' eggs?" growled Harve. "Howdy, Chief! Glad to see you up here." O'Connor waved a hand as he leaped from the car.

"What's the matter, Mr. Steve?" asked Joe.

"Nothing," declared the Scout Master emphatically. "We've come up here to get a little help, that's all."

"That's good."

"Sure it is!" echoed the Chief. "Let's all sit down where we can talk things over."

Joe ventured a second glance at Mr. Mayhew and it confirmed his first suspicion. The usually smiling face was serious and there were anxious lines about the corners of the blue eyes. "You do the talking, Chief," Mr. Steve suggested; "then we'll answer all your questions."

The others were as quick to sense that something was wrong, and there was no joking or crowding as they found places on the steps around the two men. "Suppose you tell 'em, Mr. Mayhew," said O'Connor.

Stephen Mayhew nodded agreement. "You have heard of the fire at Belknap's this morning, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir." It was Joe who answered.

"Any of you go down?"

"No. We were just getting ready to start. Mr. Bray only told us a few minutes ago. He stopped here on his way home."

"You wouldn't have heard this, if you had gone," went on Mr. Bray slowly. "The Chief isn't the sort who tells all he knows to every one. But he says he knows the Patrol and trusts it. That's why he's letting me give the whole story."

"Every bit of it," added Chief O'Connor with a

nod. "I'm willing to put all my cards on the table with this crowd any time."

The boys sat up a bit straighter. It was not because of this openly expressed confidence, but because they began to realize something serious was coming. "Go ahead," urged Nelse.

"That fire at Bray's Saturday night was suspicious," Mr. Steve went on, choosing his words, "but Bray isn't the sort who believes evil of any one. And he was unwilling to think it a case of arson. I don't believe he'd even acknowledge the possibility of such a thing now, were it not for this Belknap fire."

"Was that set?" demanded Joe.

"It was."

The boys gulped at the solemness of the statement. It began to dawn on them how serious the matter was.

"How do you know?"

Mr. Steve drew a long breath and his teeth caught his lip. "You tell them, O'Connor," he said suddenly.

"Don't like to any better than you do, sir, but I'll do it, if you say."

"Some one tell it quick," begged Harve.

The Chief turned to him and again nodded gravely. "It's my job to investigate fires, Harve," he said, "that is, when it's thought there's anything suspicious about 'em. The Belknap affair, coming so soon on top of the Bray one, sure looked queer. So I went up there at once. There was a lot of loose talk going on. Always is at such a time. But you get so you don't pay attention to that sort of thing—much. What I was after was real evidence. I found it."

"Gee!" It was a gasp from Stan Wood. "Go on."

"I found out where the fire started. That was easy. Belknap saw it first in the corner of the barn. It was the up-wind corner. That added to my suspicions. I went to where that corner had been, and started to kick round among the ruins. The fire had eaten away from there fast. There wasn't much left, though, but I found what I was looking for."

"What was it?"

"A few spots of tallow."

"Don't see what that stood for," stated Nick, disappointed.

"No? Well, it stood for a good deal with me, Reed. It's the commonest trail of the fire bug. Now I don't think for a minute that any one who's in his right mind sets a fire. It's a form of insanity: You can't tell who's got it. It's apt to crop out in the most unexpected places."

"But about that tallow?" broke in Harve, his fingers cold with excitement.

"All right. The fire bug usually works with a lantern or a candle. Either gives him time for his get-away. The candle is the simpler. You take a candle," he explained, "and set it up in a cigar box half filled with oil-soaked rags, or something equally inflammable. You pick your barn, or house, tuck your cigar box into a corner, light your candle and beat it away from there. In time, according to the length of the candle, the wick burns down till it sets the rags blazing. The building

catches, then the whole thing goes. That tallow told me such a game had been worked at Belknap's."

"Holy smoke!"

"Who did it?"

"Who do you suspect?"

"I don't suspect any one, yet," retorted the Chief, even more calmly. "But Mr. Mayhew and I are alone in that. What time did young Hunt leave here this morning?"

There was a gasp, a startled cry and half of them were on their feet. "Steady!" commanded Mr. Steve. "The Chief said that he did not suspect any one."

"He'd better not suspect Dick Hunt. Dick's all right!"

"I'm as sure of that as you are, Tug," agreed Mr. Steve, "but I think the best way for us all to prove it is by answering the Chief's questions."

"Of course you're right, sir," exploded Nelse. "But I've got to get this off my chest before this

thing goes any further: because Dick made a big mistake once is no reason why every one should pick on him for everything all the rest of his life. It isn't fair. It isn't playing the game. Dick's a Wolf. He's so proud of it he'd let horses pull him apart before he'd do anything to hurt the Patrol. I don't care what any one says, whether the Chief hints he's insane or what, Dick's all right and I'm for him."

There was a yell from the rest. There could be no doubt as to the feeling of the Wolves. It was one for all and all for one. A slow smile flitted across O'Connor's face. "Wish I had such loyalty behind me. Suppose Lowell answers my question now. What time did Hunt leave this morning?" "I don't know."

The Chief straightened, and Stephen Mayhew's jaw squared. "Don't you understand that the Chief is with us in this, Joe?" he asked.

"I'm telling you the truth, sir; I don't know. He had gone when we woke up. None of us heard him leave."

It was O'Connor who bit his lip now. "Did he say anything last night about what time he planned to start, Joe?"

"Only that he must be in Gillfield before the bank opened. Wasn't he there?"

"Yes."

"Then he must have left here about dawn."

"That's what his mother says."

"Then why ask us?"

"Easy, Harve!" cautioned Mr. Steve. "The Chief's not trying to trip Dick; he's really working to help him, I think."

"And," declared O'Connor emphatically, "the less you fellows get hot under the collar, the more you're going to aid Hunt. I want to prove his statements by your testimony."

"But why do you suspect him at all?" demanded Harve, still mad.

"I didn't say I did. But others do."

"Who?"

"I'm not going to tell you that."

"Guess that's sense," growled Stan. "We

wouldn't exactly go out of our way to be friendly with such a yellow pup."

"Keep cool," advised Mr. Steve. "I know it's hard. It's trying my patience, too. But it's the best way to help Dick."

"But what in thunder would Dick Hunt go round setting fires for?" demanded Nelse. "There's no sense in this stuff."

"Some one did set both fires," stated the Chief.
"Some one's accused Hunt of being the fire bug.
And he can't account for himself Saturday night
any more than he can for this morning."

"He sure can!" snapped Fat. "He was out on the lake Saturday night when the Bray barn burned."

"Who saw him there, Foster?"

"No one. He says he was. That's enough."

"All right. I won't argue that now. Where was he this morning?"

"On his way to Gillfield when that Belknap shack burned."

"Certainly. That was also on the road to Gill-field, wasn't it? He had to pass it, didn't he?"

"I suppose so. But he didn't set it afire."

"All right. But what I want to get at is, can any of you fellows give him any alibi that will hold water for either fire?"

Harve started to answer but suddenly stopped and looked helplessly at Joe. But Lowell was only shaking his head, his eyes looking from boy to boy. They were all silent. There was nothing they could say which would help the boy they all wanted so much to help. None of them had been with him during the time either fire had been started; none knew where Dick had been during the critical moments; none thought for a moment, however, that he had been elsewhere from where he had said. In spite of the circumstantial evidence O'Connor had spread before them, they believed in Dick Hunt and were ready to go to any length to aid him.

It was Ned Field, who had come to know Dick better than most of them, who finally broke out. "See here, Chief," he flared, "this stuff of trying to hang something on Dick is all bunk. If any one but you were doing it, I'd say it was only because Dick's been in wrong once and you cops are just naturally suspicious of him. A goat's needed and he's handy. But you're not that sort; you're white. You've something else up your sleeve. I don't know what, but I'm going to take a chance at pulling it out. You're trying to eliminate Dick because you really suspect some one else. So do I."

"Who?" The Chief's question crackled.

"Hanson, same as you," Ned answered with equal sharpness.

For a second the Chief's eyes held his. "Maybe I do and then again maybe I can't, Ned. Anyway, I'll tell you this much; I've seen Hanson. I've questioned him mighty sharp. Both he and his wife say he was home in bed when both fires started. Her confirmation of his alibi would hold in any court. It lets him out."

"But who says Dick would do such a thing? Tell us that," demanded Nelse.

"No. You fellows would do your best to play the game, but you couldn't help showing your feelings

and that might spoil everything. I'm not going to make any statements till I can prove them. I wouldn't have come to you now if I hadn't been as anxious as you to clear things up. Maybe Hunt didn't do anything, but I don't like the way everything seems to be lining up against him. I hoped some of you could establish an alibi for him."

"We don't need one," declared Nelse.

"I'm afraid he's going to," said the Chief grimly, as he rose. "You fellows own he has a bad record behind him, and you're his friends. What are other people going to say?"

Stephen Mayhew, too, rose. He had come to Camp Lowell to allow the boys to talk and he was more than satisfied with both their words and spirit. "I'm as certain as you all are," he stated, "that things are not going to prove black for Dick. I trust him as fully as each of you does. I want the whole thing cleared up and I want Dick cleared. And I'm so sure that he can be cleared that I'm going to let O'Connor offer a reward of \$500 for information leading to the capture of this fire bug."

"That sure shows where you stand, sir."

"It's like you, Mr. Steve. The Mayhews sure play the game."

"We try to, Nelse," he agreed. "But this means a little more to me than it does even to the farmers up here. I'm not thinking of all our own property, either. O'Connor, I'd like to give you that five hundred personally. I hope it's you who solves the problem."

"I'm going to do my best, sir," agreed the Chief.

"And I'm going to start doing it by asking you to take me back to Gillfield so's I can talk with young Hunt before he leaves the bank."

"All right," he assented, starting for the car. "Naturally you fellows won't talk about this," he called back.

"Of course not, sir."

"But we're going to do a heap of thinking," promised Nelse, and stalked moodily into the camp.

The two men had little to say as they rode back to Gillfield. Each was too busy with his own thoughts to desire interruption from the other. O'Connor was disappointed, however, when, on arriving before the bank. Mr. Steve refused to go in with him. "If we both went," he said, "the boy'd put far more weight on our visit than there's excuse for."

"Have it your own way, Mr. Steve," agreed the Chief. "I'll ring you up when anything new develops." He waved a good-by and strolled into the bank, to come to a halt by Mr. Nelson's desk. "Let me have five minutes alone with young Hunt?" he asked.

"What's wrong, Chief?" The Scout Commissioner made no effort to conceal his anxiety.

"Don't know as anything is. Want to know what he knows about a fire up country this morning."

"But surely you can't connect that boy with it in any way. Don't let what did happen allow you to persecute the youngster, O'Connor. We trust him implicitly."

"Glad to hear it. Can you send him into the director's room and let me wait there?"

"Yes." Mr. Nelson rose slowly, his face clouded.

He was anything but pleased with O'Connor's method of approach and, when he spoke to Dick, his tone was unusually friendly. The boy smiled confidently as he listened to the request, and the smile was still on his lips as he went through the bank and into the director's room.

"Hello, Chief! What can I do for you?" he asked.

"Don't know—yet. Hear about the fire at Belk-nap's?"

"No. When? Why," he added suddenly, "Belknap's farm is right near our camp. I came by there this morning. Everything was all right then. What's happened?"

"Barn burned."

"Gee! Like Mr. Bray's did Saturday night. Say, Chief," he exclaimed, his face suddenly sobering, "you don't think there's anything queer about the combination, do you?"

"Dunno quite what to think. Both of 'em burned to the ground and no one seems to have much idea how either fire started."

"Wish I could help you. I didn't notice any one around Belknap's when I came by there this morning."

"Did you look especially?"

"Don't believe I did—especially. It was pretty early. I was watching to see where I'd find the first people awake."

"Where did you?"

"On that farm at the foot of the mountain."

"What time was that?"

"Ten minutes past five. I looked at my watch."

"Belknap discovered the fire at five. You must have passed his place about quarter of."

"May have been a few minutes later. I ran some on the down grade."

"And you didn't see any one?"

"No."

"Hadn't seen any one till you came to that farm at the foot of the mountain?"

"Only the fellows at camp. And they were asleep," Dick answered promptly; "they wouldn't count."

"What did you do after you got to Gillfield?"

"Got my breakfast, then came—" Dick stopped abruptly, his face becoming ashen. "You don't—" he gulped, "you don't think I—I had anything to—to do with those fires?"

"Did you?" The Chief's question snapped out. Another change came over the boy. If he had wilted under the sudden knowledge that the finger of suspicion was again pointing at him, he now stiffened as quickly. His head was up and his eyes were steady as he looked O'Connor in the face. "You know I didn't," he said. "I was crooked once but now I'm a Scout."

CHAPTER X

UNEXPECTED CONFIDENCE

DICK HUNT stood alone by the big mahogany table as the Chief stalked out of the bank. For a moment he was calm and cool; the next, and his hands were clutching the table's rim. O'Connor thought him guilty! His past was rising to threaten him. No matter how hard he had tried, he had been unable to live down his record. There was nothing he could do to prove his innocence; no one who could furnish him with the vitally necessary alibi. He had been trusted and he had tried to make himself worthy of that trust, and now his very helplessness was to stain those who had been his friends in time of need.

He swayed as his knuckles, clutching, grew white. The room was whirling around him. From every side some crushing force came closing in on him. Alone, he could not contend against it. And he was alone. He felt there was none to help him. His head sank forward and his eyes filled. But, as they did, they settled on the gleaming badge upon his chest. He was a Scout and he wore the Scout emblem. He had told the Chief that, but the telling had brought him nothing like the quick comfort the presence of that badge did now. The fellows had trusted him because they believed in him. He knew, in spite of all, that he was worthy of that belief.

The slender shoulders began to straighten, the strong young neck to stiffen, and the haze to clear from before the blue eyes. One course of action was open to him and one alone. The thing was here; it must be met four-square. It should be met by a Scout who was unafraid to look any man in the eye.

A minute later he strode out of the room with firm step and went back to his work, his lips set, his courage high. But there was another in Gillfield whose conscience was not so calm. Stephen Mayhew, after leaving O'Connor, had started for the office but, as he went, he blamed himself more and more. It was the first time he had ever turned his back on one of his boys when trouble was in the air. Yet this time he had acted for what he believed would be Dick's comfort. Going in there with the Chief would have made it seem that he, too, thought there was ground for suspicion.

Although he had acted through kind-heartedness alone, it troubled him, and, within the hour, the big runabout again came to a stop before the bank. He entered the enclosure about Mr. Nelson's desk with a nod and drew up a chair. "O'Connor say anything to you, George?" he demanded abruptly.

"Something. Why?"

"This thing's worrying me. If that boy is given another smash, it is more than apt to ruin his whole life. I'm convinced O'Connor is making an ass of himself; I hope he does nothing more serious. Has he broken the boy all up?"

Better see him and form your own opinion,"

suggested Mr. Nelson, and touched a button set into the edge of the desk.

A moment later Dick came through the narrow passage in the rear of the counter. But it was not the Dick Mr. Steve had feared to see. The man settled back in his chair. "Hello!" he said easily. "How'd you leave everything at camp?"

"Better than things have been there since, I guess, sir."

"So you've heard about the Belknap fire?"

The boy's face sobered and he nodded assent, his eyes fixed on the two men.

"I think every one has by now, Steve," offered Mr. Nelson, drily.

Mr. Mayhew was quick to perceive that the Commissioner was out of sympathy with his mode of questioning, and quick to decide on a new course of action. "What I came in here for," he announced, "was to tell you we need another man in our office, Dick, and to see if you cared to take the position."

This time the slender figure stiffened and the head

went back as if struck sharply on the chin. "Does that mean that you want to get rid of me, Mr. Nelson? Is this an easy way of letting me down?"

The banker smiled. "It's all news to me," he answered; "we're more that satisfied with you and your work. We don't want to lose you; neither do we want to stand in the way of your bettering yourself."

"I don't think I quite understand."

"I don't know as I do, either," agreed Mr. Nelson.
"Let Mr. Mayhew do the explaining."

Mayhew laughed grimly. "That's right," he said; "put me entirely in the wrong. Dick, I don't beat about the bush with you Wolves, as a rule; I'm not going to now. I know about O'Connor's call here and I can imagine what he said. What I'm trying to do, and making a mess of, is to show you that the Mayhews believe in you and are going to stand by you."

The boy flushed scarlet. "Thanks," he said, in a very low voice. "That helps a lot." Suddenly he straightened again and his eyes met Mr. Steve's.

"I'd like to work for the Mayhews," he said, "but I'll never leave Mr. Nelson as long as he wants me. He stood by me when I was down. He gave me my chance to make good. It's the only way I can show him my gratitude—doing that and by being straight. And I am straight, Mr. Steve. I don't know a thing about that fire. But, if I left here now and went to you, people might think Mr. Nelson didn't believe in me any more and wanted to get rid of me. That's selfish, I know, but I've only got a little bit of reputation and I'm going to guard that."

"You're right," declared Mr. Steve; "your place is here and I'm glad to know you're facing this thing unafraid."

"There's nothing for me to be afraid of," the boy answered simply.

"Is there anything you'd like either of us to do? I'm sure Mr. Nelson is as ready as I to do all in his power."

"I certainly am," agreed the banker. "It's a big satisfaction to me to have Dick meet this injustice with his head up, and I'm as sure that he's going to come through it clean as he knows he is."

Dick's brain had not been idle during the past hour and, now that they gave him the chance he had planned to make for himself, was quick to accept it. "I was to have my vacation in August," he said; "I'd like it ever so much if things could be arranged so's I could take it now."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go up to camp, if you all will let me. I'm going to be where people can find me. I don't want to avoid any one or any thing. O'Connor, or any one else, can watch me all he wants. If there are other fires, people will know where I am. I'm not going to run away from anything and I want to be where I can keep my own eyes open. I'm not going to take this thing with my hands in my pockets. I want a chance to do more than protect myself."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," he answered evenly, "that it means even more to me than it does to Chief O'Connor to catch the person who set those fires." Mr. Nelson understood but, in spite of the sympathy he felt for the boy's courageous avowal, smiled quietly. "I think I can arrange to let you go tomorrow," he said. "But, frankly, Dick, I wouldn't let my hope of solving the affair unaided rise too high. It seems to be bothering O'Connor a good deal and he's a man of much experience. Of course, like any one else, he makes mistakes. We feel he's made one in this case already but, as soon as he finds it out, he'll rectify it immediately and do it like the man he is."

"You don't have to defend the Chief to me," cried Dick. "I know him and I like him."

"By George!" exclaimed Mr. Steve. "I'll say you're game, Dick. I couldn't take this thing the way you're taking it."

"I'm sorter thinking," acknowledged the boy, in a low tone, "that I'm taking it just the way you would, were you in my place. It's what's giving me the sand to go through with it."

"That's some compliment, Steve!" declared Mr. Nelson. "You certainly have your job cut out to

live up to the ideal the Wolves have made for you. But I think Dick's quite right; you've trained your Patrol to meet things four-square; any of them have yet to show the white feather. But I think this boy here is doing the bravest thing of all. He's not avoiding trouble; he's going as far as he can to meet and conquer it on its own ground."

"He is," agreed Mr. Steve. "What are we going to do to help him?"

"Let him alone," advised Mr. Nelson.

"It's what I'd like to do, but it seems heartless."

"It isn't," stated Dick. "I think you both believe in me; I think the fellows at camp will, when they know all about it. Really, I'm trying to look on it all as good luck instead of bad, for it's going to give me a chance to show I'm worthy of being a Wolf."

"All right," agreed Mr. Mayhew. "Fight your own battle, Dick, but don't forget you have reserves within call, if you need us." He got up and reached for his hat. "Do you care to tell us what you plan to do?"

"I haven't any plan. Some one up there is trying to make trouble for me, and I'm going to make sure who that is first."

"Meaning you suspect Hanson?"

Dick met the sharp look evenly. "I don't want to be unjust even to a man like Hanson," he retorted. "The Chief appears satisfied that Hanson had nothing to do with either of these fires."

"If that's true," said Mr. Steve, "be mighty careful if you get anywhere near him. He's ugly and has had it in for all of us, for some reason or other. Don't give him a chance to trap you." He nodded to Mr. Nelson and started for the door. "I'll send you up to Camp Lowell in the morning, if you want."

"Thanks, sir, but I guess I'll get myself up there, if you don't mind."

"I don't. Tell the crowd I'll be up in a day or so, and good luck to you!" He nodded again to them both and went out.

"Do you want, anything more of me?" Dick asked. "No."

"Thank you, sir." He, too, turned and left Mr. Nelson busy again at his desk. But it was hard work to rivet his attention on the figures before him. He wanted to get out and begin to do something. It was almost too hard to sit there and follow routine work accurately when everything he held dear was at stake. Yet he knew he must do it, and he knew even better that he must do something far more He must keep his own courage high. There must be no surrender to sensitiveness, no more of choosing the easier way, no more avoidance of people who might look at him askance. had nothing to conceal, nothing to be afraid of. He was a Scout and a Scout is brave.

One thing troubled him deeply, however. was more than worried lest some hint of the Chief's attitude should reach his mother before he could see her again. So, when his luncheon hour came, he raced home, knowing the one thing to do was to tell her the full story as he knew it; and, motherlike, she gave him greater courage by her unshaken faith.

It was on his way back to work that his nerve was put to a sudden test. He had felt that the Fox Patrol had never liked him. Even during their visit to the lake, it had seemed to him that they had accepted him merely because he was a Wolf and in spite of the fact that he was Dick Hunt with a past. So now, when he saw Bill Long strolling down the street, habit urged him to cross over and avoid him. But then his new resolve flared and he continued with even step.

Just then Bill spied him. Dick, walking, thought he detected a sudden narrowing of the eyes and tightening of the lips; but before he could be sure, Bill raised a hand to shade his eyes, and pretended to scan the surrounding scenery as if he were a dime novel plainsman in search of the hated Red Skin. "Hist!" he exclaimed. "Hast seen it?"

"Seen what?"

"The fire bug."

Dick's heart missed a beat but he managed to keep the half smile on his face. "What's the idea?" he asked evenly. "Still got your neck way back in your shell, have you? Why don't you crawl out once in a while and hear what's doin'? Don't you know about the reward the Mayhews have offered?"

"No."

Bill whistled. "Always knew you guys were more than half asleep," he comforted. "Guess I won't give the snap away. Not that you Wolves would make any difference, but you might blunder round till you'd gummed things up worse than you usually do. We Foxes have got that five hundred spent already."

Dick, adding two and two with what he already knew, reached an answer which seemed fairly rational. But he wanted proof of its correctness. "Tell it all," he begged.

"Sure! Heard of those fires around Camp Lowell, haven't you? All right. The Mayhews have offered five hundred dollars reward for the capture of the person who set them. I'm hunting that person; so's everybody else in Gillfield. Excuse me a minute while I give you the once over."

He grinned as he grabbed Dick's shoulder and spun him around. "No," he proclaimed, "not guilty. You're too slow to set even the Wolves afire. Whist! Who comes?" And again the hand shaded the piercing eyes.

Dick smiled in spite of himself. Yet it was the most relieved smile he had ever known. Certainly here was one who held no suspicion, else he would never have made a joke of such a serious thing. And this boy was one whom Dick had not felt he could call friend! Again his heart seemed to miss a beat. But the sensation was entirely different this time. "Quit joking, Bill," he begged, suddenly warm all over, "and give me the whole story."

"Have. We Foxes are out for that reward. O'Connor tipped us off to keep awake. He knew where to come for help, that bull," grinned Bill modestly. "And, say, Dick, slip this to Joe and the rest: we fellows are out for blood. You got the Foxes all stirred up at camp. We're goin' to have one near you and this is where we earn the dough to get it with. Anything you chaps do to

get in ahead of us will be considered unfriendly. You've got yours; don't be hogs. Now beat it! My time's worth a million dollars a second and I can't waste any more fortunes on you. And say, old scout," he added suddenly, "next time you see the Chief, tell him from me he's a fat-head."

It was as unexpected as the clip he gave Dick between the shoulders before he tore up the street in pursuit of something or other he pretended to have seen. But it left Dick almost ready to sing. In his own way Bill Long had said that he had heard the whole story and put absolutely no faith in O'Connor's theory. It meant even more to him than had the expressed confidence of Mr. Nelson. The boys, who had despised him, now believed in him. It was good indeed to be a Scout.

CHAPTER XI

AN ATTACK FROM BEHIND

DICK approached Camp Lowell the next afternoon with something more than a feeling of self-consciousness. Under the circumstances, it was only natural that a boy should experience a sensation of dread as to his possible reception. But this was dispelled like rocks which sit too long on a nervous stick of dynamite. As soon as he came in sight there was a yell, a rush, a mêlée and then Ned Field had him by the ear and was leading him up the steps.

"He's robbed the bank," he shouted. "He was headed for Canada with the swag. There're thousands and thousands of tame nickels concealed in his pack. He was desperate but I overcame him. My middle name's Pinkerton and I'll now show you how to give the third degree."

"Quit it!" begged Dick, fighting to recover his bundle before it was spread over the surrounding scenery.

"What are you doing here, anyway?"

"Got my vacation now."

"Mean they've waked up at last and fired you," corrected Harve. "Tell the truth, my son. You can't surprise us."

"How'd you happen to get it now, Dick?" queried Joe.

"Asked Mr. Nelson to let me change the date. Thought I'd like to be up here now."

"Why?"

Dick's face sobered. "Because," he announced, looking round the group, "I thought I'd like to be where things have happened, as long as the Chief thinks I made them happen."

There was an instant's astounded silence, then Bedlam. Ten seconds later none had legitimate excuses to plead ignorance as to the belief of the Wolves in Dick Hunt. Had the Chief appeared at the moment, he would have heard discomforting

news as to his professional ability and personal intelligence.

It was Joe who put an emphatic end to the eruption. "Dick knows where we stand," he declared, "and slanging the Chief doesn't get any one anywhere. This thing is a Patrol affair now. We're all together; we're all in it. It means as much to each one of us as it does to Dick. We've always acted as a crowd; we'll do it now."

"But what'll we do?" asked Tug anxiously.

"We'll do our best to catch that fire bug," declared Joe.

"We're not the only ones trying," observed Dick, and told of his talk with Bill Long.

Nelse Pease treated himself to a real laugh. "I can see that Fox outfit pulling off this thing," he said. "Every time anything comes up, those guys are going to get famous. I'll bet they've spent that five hundred six times this morning, and are fighting now about whether they'll have a kitchen in their new camp or buy a motor boat."

"They're good chaps," protested Dick; "Bill was fine to me."

"Why shouldn't he be?" demanded Nelse. "That didn't cost him any part of his five hundred. Did he say whether they were going to paint their shack blue or light pink?"

"I'd like to see 'em have a place near us, just the same," observed Harve.

"Sure you would! You've got some scheme cooked up, all right, by which you'll share your work with one of 'em."

"We could get in a lot of ball games, if they were up here," sighed Alex.

"I'm off ball till all the big game's killed out of this country," stated Nelse. "As for the Foxes getting any reward or camp, let's talk of something sensible, like building a battleship in the swimming hole or Stan's having the nerve to serve us another soup soufflé."

"You don't have to eat what I cook, if you don't like it."

"Not so long as the canned stuff lasts, I don't," agreed Nelse promptly. "Some one chuck Dick's stuff inside, so long as he's too lazy to, and let's do something."

"What?"

"Anything except walk on tip-toe so you can sleep in that hammock, you big beef!" Nelse tried his best to glare at the placid Foster.

"Let's go fishing then."

"Oh, have a heart! Give that poor fish one day off."

"I know what two of us are going to do," stated Ned. "Dick and I are going up to the Brays' after supplies. He's got to do some work."

"That suits me," Dick agreed promptly. "I'd like a chance to talk with Mr. Bray."

"That pair's too willing," observed Harve.
"There's somethin' doin' up there in the way of a party. We'll all go."

They were all ready enough to visit the farm on any sort of excuse. Their new room had to be inspected at least once a day, and Mrs. Bray enjoyed their running in and out of her house quite as much as the boys did. Stan was the first to start through the woods, and Dick was about to follow when Ned caught his arm.

"Don't you go galavanting off like a gladsome butterfly, you bank robber," he commanded. "There're two baskets, a pail, and fourteen million milk bottles that some one's got to tote; and you're half the supply department, now you're officially in camp."

"I want to do my share," declared Dick; "show me where they are."

"Nothing in the world would give me more pleasure; nothing, except to have you carry 'em all. Come on. We'll catch up with you gentlemen of leisure," he called after the rest. "Take it easy so you won't get all tired out lifting your feet." He hurried into the kitchen, Dick at his heels; but once inside, he began to move more slowly. "Let 'em go," he suggested. "I want to have a good, old talk with you."

"Go as far as you like."

"You mean that?" He had paused in packing up the milk bottles and looked at Dick.

"I certainly do, Ned."

Field nodded, satisfied. "Thought I had you sized up right. Just what is there in all this mess, old fellow?"

"I don't know," he confessed. "The Chief didn't talk with me much. I gave him my word I knew nothing, but I don't think he believed me."

"The big puff-ball!"

Dick shook his head as he picked up his load.

"He can't forget I've been guilty of a worse thing,
Ned. I think more's happened than I know about.

Some one's accused me of setting both fires and,
because I can't prove an alibi for either one, he's
got to suspect me because there's no one else to
blame the thing on."

"Anybody'd think you were arguing this thing for O'Connor," he growled.

"I'm trying to see it as he does, so's I can get some place to start working from. You can't see it my way because you've always been straight. I'll be suspected of every rotten thing that happens in Gillfield for the next ten years. I'm in luck not to have been arrested already. I guess I would have been, if it hadn't been for Mr. Steve."

"Rot!"

"I wish it were," sighed the boy. "It's fine of you to be so decent about it."

"Decent!" exploded Ned. "Don't you think the whole crowd's rabid because one of us is suspected. O'Connor's about as popular up here as Hec's little friend. See here," he broke out, as they turned into the path to the Brays' place, "don't you think the best thing to do is to have a Patrol meeting and talk over what we'd all better do?"

"I'd rather not; I can talk with you better than I * could with the crowd."

"But Joe?" he pleaded. "Joe's always got ideas."

"I'd like to try it alone, first, I guess," he answered slowly. "I've told you I've got to find a starting point. Have you heard anything up here?"

"Heard some one say it'd be like Hanson to set those fires."

"The Chief's followed that idea. Hanson had perfect alibis. He's cleared."

"But hadn't you thought of him, Dick?"

For a moment he was silent. "Yes," he confessed, "I had. But that's between us. Hanson said he'd get me for that row we had on the road, but even a man like Hanson wouldn't turn fire bug just to get even with a boy."

"The Chief says most fire bugs are insane." "I'll be—if this thing keeps up."

It was almost a groan. Ned took one quick step and his arm went about the slender shoulder. "Don't talk about it any more, old fellow," he comforted. "I wanted to help; I always like to share my hard luck. I thought it would make it easier for you, if you talked. I won't mention it again. None of us will. But every one of the fellows is on the job every minute, just as I am; and when you need us, we'll be right there."

"Thanks."

It was Ned who quickened the pace and started the fun as soon as they overtook the rear guard. The Patrol was in its true form when it romped into the Brays' yard, Hec trying to bark his head off, Harve singing at the top of his lungs, and Nelse and Nick doing their best to upset Alex at every step. Mr. Bray and his two hired men straightened from their work among the ruins of the barn to watch the fun, and then the farmer, an amused twinkle in his eye, called to Lowell. "Send those Indians over here to work off their steam."

"Go to it, gang!" ordered Joe.

"And get my lily-white hands all smudged up?" fumed Fat. "What do you think I came here for? I'm no cinder hound."

"I choose to carry the half-burned shingles," announced Nelse; "I have to be careful of my back."

"He strained it carrying a cup and saucer into the kitchen," Ned explained, as the crowd raced up to Mr. Bray. "Also he got a bad blister picking flowers. Grab that beam, you wop, and heave!"

"Here, wait!" commanded the farmer, as the boys

sprang to lift the big timber. "That goes over on the other side. I can use it in the new barn. Only the trash on this side. Hello, Dick, when did you come?"

"Just a little while ago, sir."

"Going to stay?"

"For two weeks."

Mr. Bray nodded, but his glance lingered on the boy a moment before he bent to his task. "You chaps don't have to do this, you know," he said, as his crow-bar dug deep. "I was only joking when I ordered you over."

"Haven't anything else to do," confessed Joe.

"Just as soon as you're tired, then quit. Mother's baking some pies for you, I reckon."

"I'm all worn out," declared Harve, promptly dropping his end of the beam. "Tug, tell Hec there's a rat under this mess and let him dig it up. We'll go right up and see if Mrs. Bray doesn't want us to dust the sweet peas."

But it was quite two hours later before Mr. Bray drove a decidedly dirty crowd ahead of him to the

house. The boys had neither looked for, nor wanted, reward for their work. Nor did the Brays consider the feast set forth as one. They liked the Wolves and hospitality was their means of showing their affection. It was not until Mrs. Bray's baking had been thoroughly sampled, and the baskets packed with what had escaped, that Nelse decided to make sure the Wolves' winter quarters were still upstairs. Five started to go along as a body guard and, as Dick followed in their wake, Mr. Bray laid a hand on his arm. "Seen my new chickens?" he asked. "Come take a look."

"All right." Dick knew which sort of chickens laid eggs, and there both knowledge and interest ceased. But, from the expression on the kindly face, he knew it was but an excuse and quickly followed out into the yard.

It came with startling suddeness. "Don't think I'd stay up here, if I were you, boy," offered the man, in a grave voice.

"Why?"

"Because there are a lot of people round here who're sorter nervous an' might do things they were sorry for later."

Dick drew a long breath. "I suppose," he said, "that means they think I had something to do with those fires."

"Maybe. Anyway it means they won't stop to talk, if they see you round their places."

"Do you think I started your fire?"

"Know ye didn't, boy. Don't know who did, but know you didn't. But I don't want any of you in trouble, and people up here are all het up."

The boy's teeth set over his lower lip. "Why should they pick on me?" he demanded. "Who started them suspecting me? Tell me that."

"Hanson."

"I thought so."

"Why?"

"Because of that row the other Saturday. But there's more behind it than that," went on Dick. "He's had it in for the Mayhews ever since he's lived here. He thinks he can hit at Mr. Steve and the Old Boss through me. If I run away, he'll say it's because I'm guilty. That's why I came here. With me here, he'll try something, if I'm the victim he's after."

"That's a good move, but it's foolish. He's too crafty for you."

"Probably," confessed Dick. "But, between you and me, he's the one I—I'm not going to say it, even to you," he finished quickly.

"Needn't be afraid to talk with me."

"I'd rather not talk with any one until I know what I'm talking about," he stated. "And I do thank you for your kindness. But I'm going to stick."

"You're old enough to decide for yourself," agreed the farmer, in a rather disappointed voice. "I hope you aren't making a mistake. But stick with the boys; whatever you do, don't go off alone." With which, he turned and went back to the porch to speak with Joe before he returned to his work.

Dick appreciated the wisdom of that advice, but how to follow it, and still follow out the plan already more than half formed in his brain, was something more than he could solve. It was not that he did not want to take any of the Wolves into his confidence but that he was certain that what he wanted to do could be done better alone.

Yet he was so deeply grateful to Mr. Bray, both for his faith and his interest, that all that afternoon he hardly left the camp veranda without asking Ned to go with him. Nelse, who could not go many hours without something to laugh about, began to notice Dick's new-born desire to keep both feet in Ned's shadow. "Why is it," he sighed, "that no one ever falls in love with me?"

"Probably," comforted Fat, "because none of your near-friends are blind."

"But I need affection, Fatness."

"What you need most is a wallop in the eye."

"It might mar my fatal beauty, dear one."

"I'd like to see it tried," confessed Harve.

"You always were rough," murmured Nelse; "rough and uncouth. I think I prefer Hec."

"Hec's had one piece of hard luck; why wish a worse one on him?"

"But see how the grateful Field flourishes under the tender friendship of Dick. Wouldn't you like to see me flourish, also, Harvey?"

"Oh, cut it out!" growled Ned. "You fellows go do something useful and leave me alone."

"Such as what?"

"Drown yourself first."

"I think Harve would prefer your second suggestion. Personally, I'm in favor of your third."

"Wish I didn't have anything to do but exercise my face. Go help Stan and Nick get supper."

"We're unpopular in the cook shack," owned Harve.

"What do you think you are here?"

"I've been trying to tell you," sighed Nelse; "we're lonesome for your companionship. Here comes Dick again. Suppose he wants you to hold his hand while he walks down to the lake and plucks a pond lily for his hair."

"Stan says we need more milk," announced

Dick, joining the crowd. "I'm going up to the farm for it. Want to come, Ned?"

"No, I don't," declared Field impulsively, his nerves a bit sensitive.

"All right. I'd just as soon go alone. I'll be back so's you won't have to wait supper, fellows." And, with a wave of the hand, he darted along the path which led to the Bray place.

He gave his neglect of the farmer's advice no thought until, as he came out of the woods into the highway, he noticed a ramshackle buggy coming toward him. A moment later and the bony horse was yanked to a stand close in front of him and Hanson was snarling over the dash.

"Whatcher doin' up here again?" he demanded. "Don't O'Connor know nothin' bout his business? You lemme tell yer this, young feller; if he don't, we folks up this away do. Ye git out o' here 'fore there be more trouble, an' ye git quick."

"What are you talking about?" asked Dick coldly.

"Ye know what I'm talking about, an' don't ye

give me none o' yer back talk. Me an' a lot o' others up here's through talkin'. We've been watchin' ye close; we'll keep watchin' ye close till ye git out. Ye start gittin' now."

"I won't and you can't make me."

Hanson had not expected deliberate challenge. For a second he was too angry to speak. Then, instead of a flood of invective, a crafty smile crinkled his mean face. "Can't I?" he sneered. "If I can't, we'll see what O'Connor an' I kin, young feller. Ye've had yer warnin'; now take what's comin'." He lashed his horse and Dick barely had time to leap into the ditch to prevent being run down.

Yet, instead of hurrying to Mr. Bray with the story, he stood watching Hanson disappear around a dusty curve. He knew it was open war now. There was some comfort in that. It was better to know whom to fear than to look on every one as an enemy. But what he could not understand was why Hanson should declare that he was the fire bug.

He supposed he could fulfill his threat by at least telephoning to the Chief. But Dick could see small additional danger in that. He had made no secret about coming to Camp Lowell. O'Connor must know he had joined the boys and that he could be found at any time, if wanted. The last thing he intended to do was to leave. In some way he felt that this would suit Hanson's purpose quite as much as it would fail to meet his own.

As he started on, he thought he had best recount the whole incident at the farm and ask advice. But then he knew that he would take none, unless it coincided with his own determination to stay and follow this affair to an end. He frankly suspected Hanson of at least knowing all about what had occurred. He would watch Hanson, if he could; he would catch him, if possible, but he would not run away from him or from anything.

But how he would carry out the first part of his resolve was a question. The temptation to take Ned into his confidence was great. The more he saw of Field, the better he liked him and the more

he trusted him. Together they could work better than Dick could alone. He decided to take that step that very evening, and he felt sure Ned would give him whole hearted support.

It was because of this decision, and his eagerness to get back to camp and through supper so as to talk with Ned, that he spent no time at the farm, not even stopping to see Mr. Bray. It was already dusk and he knew the farmer was busy with his own work; and, while he was always ready to chat with any of the boys from camp, there was no reason to encroach upon his good nature now. So, with the milk bottles, received from Mrs. Bray, in each hand, he trotted back down the road and swung into the woods.

Among the thickening pines dusk grew almost to darkness, but Dick gave that no thought. He knew the way, he knew the woods, and he knew himself. Also he knew it was more than supper time and, because of this, quickened his already fast pace.

The path wound in and out among the trees

and through the thickets, and was rough enough so that it was necessary for the flying Dick to keep his eyes on the ground. He did not want to stumble and risk a fall which might break the bottles and necessitate a return to the farm. Then, as he swung a sharp turn, he did stumble.

Something thin and strong had caught his ankle. He staggered, plunged, crashed headlong to the soft ground. There was a sharp crash of broken glass, a sharper grunt of triumph from the brush behind him and the next instant two knees struck his back, something rough and stifling was wrapped about his head, and two strong hands closed about his throat.

CHAPTER XII

WHAT MR. STEVE SAW

Tug Wilson, near the foot of the supper table, set down his glass with a sigh. "If you feel as bad as all that about it," suggested Nelse, "have some more. Fat, drive the cow this way."

"Tug's out of luck," stated Harve; "milk's all gone."

"Dick went—" Ned stopped short. "Where is Dick?" he demanded. "He ought to have been back before this."

"Probably Mrs. Bray asked him to stay there for supper," said Tug.

"He wouldn't have stayed," stated Ned; "it's his job to get the milk here. He wouldn't fall down on it. Joe, something's wrong."

Lowell, at the head of the table, shook his head. "Guess not," he answered. "Something or other's

keeping him. He isn't as used to it here as we all are, and he's gotten interested in something or other and has forgotten to come back."

"He'll show up in a minute full of enthusiasm over some rabbit track or squirrel trail," promised Nelse. "He's always tracking something or other now."

"He oughter practice on cows," declared Harve.
"Shoot me the bread, Tug."

But Ned was not ready to accept Dick's failure to return promptly so casually. He did not think it like him to neglect any part of his work. He began to review the afternoon in his mind and, because he found no comfort there, his thoughts went still further into the past. And what he remembered made him leave his half finished supper and stroll onto the veranda.

Dick was not in sight, nor did he hear any sound which foretold his coming. As he stood on the edge of the steps, Joe joined him casually. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"I wish I knew; all I'm sure of is that something is."

"What makes you think so?"

"Dunno. Just a hunch."

For a moment both were silent. "Want to take a walk?" asked Joe suddenly.

"You bet!"

"Be back in a minute, fellows," Joe called to the rest. "Ned and I are going up to the farm."

"Think anything's happened to Dick?" Tug's face was anxious as he came to the door. "Hadn't we all better turn out and hunt for him?"

"Guess not. I still think he's at the Brays'. Come along, Ned."

They started at a jog but, as soon as they were well into the woods, Ned slowed to a walk. "I don't like this," he reiterated. "I'm sure we won't find him at the farm."

"What do you think? Let's have it all."

"I don't even want to think it. I like and trust Dick. I know he's all right. But he's more than suspected, or O'Connor wouldn't have talked so much. He's disappeared once before; we're not going to find him now. There're all sorts of rotten possibilities in this."

"I think you're making a heap of trouble out of nothing at all," contended Joe. "I'm as sure Dick was on the lake when the Bray fire started as you are. The Belknap fire was just coincidence."

"It will be almighty bad coincidence for Dick if anything happens before we can find him now," growled Ned. "He's taken a big chance. He ought to have more sense. If he's gone hunting this fire bug alone he's doing the very thing the fire bug wants him to do. Whoever it is knows Dick's under suspicion, you can bet your life on that. And he's going to do all he can to strengthen that suspicion. It's better than any alibi for the fire bug. Dick's being made a goat of. That makes me mad enough, but what makes me madder is to have him go off alone and make a goat of himself."

"There's something in that," admitted Joe. "I never thought of it in that way when he told me

he was going to try to clear himself. Wish I had. I'd have ordered him to stick with one of us. We've got to find him. Come on!"

They raced to the farm at top speed. But Dick was not in the Bray kitchen. The farmer's face was grave as he listened to their story. "I told him this morning not to go off alone," he recalled. "There's more than one man up here who believes Chief O'Connor's on the right trail. You boys get back to camp and turn out the whole Patrol. Don't talk, but find Hunt and find him quick."

If the two had come fast, they returned faster. Hope was high that Dick would be waiting them at camp. But they knew, as soon as they saw the quiet group on the steps, that he was not there.

Joe did not bother to ask questions. "Patrol attention!" he snapped. "Either Dick's lost or something's happened to him. Are the boats all here, Alex?"

"Yes."

[&]quot;Then he isn't on the lake."

"Might have gone round the other shore and borrowed one over there," suggested Alex.

"Might have. Take a canoe, Alex; if he's on the lake, find him. Report here at ten or, if you see a fire here on the point before then, come in at once. We'll start one as soon as Dick's found."

"Good!" Alex raced toward the landing.

Joe turned to the rest. "Tug, take Hec; and you and Nick Scout the Gillfield road. Harve, you and Stan take the other side of the lake. Don't any of you talk much if you meet people. No one's to know Dick's missing."

The four were off almost before he had finished speaking. "Ned and I'll take this shore," he went on. "Ned, you go south; I'll go up this way. Nelse, you stay in camp. Get the fire ready on the point and start it the second you see Dick."

The Wolf Patrol had played since it had been at Camp Lowell, but now it went on active duty with a swift silence which showed its efficiency better than anything else could have done. Almost before Joe's voice died away, Nelse was alone on the steps. The next second he, too, had disappeared into the night. That brush heap to be built on the point would be waiting for the match when the first glad shout rang through the gloom announcing that the missing Dick had been found.

"How'd we better work?" Tug's voice shook a trifle as he asked the question.

"I'm not quite sure," Nick confessed, as they came out of the woods into the main road. "Joe didn't want us to ask too many questions. I don't see how we can do anything without asking some."

"If Dick has come this way," Tug said, as if thinking aloud, "it's because he's headed for home. I think we ought to get to a telephone and ask his mother if he's there."

"But if he isn't, and if he doesn't show up there soon, it'll scare her half to death. And we can't tell her not to ask folks in town if they've seen Dick."

"Mr. Steve?" suggested Tug suddenly.

"Sure! Why didn't we think of him before? He'll find out if Dick's there, or expected there. If he isn't, we need Mr. Steve up here anyway. Come on."

They were off at real speed now, but even as they ran to that telephone they kept their eyes open in passing the scattered houses. There was no reason to suppose Dick was in any of them, but they overlooked no possible clue. When, at last, Nick heard Stephen Mayhew's voice on the wire, he panted out their distress, feeling the first hints of relief he had experienced that evening. "All right," he finished, "we'll keep on till we meet you and we'll sing or whistle all the time."

"Gee!" sighed Tug, as Nick hung up; "it's good to have him to help."

"But that's all he will do," stated Nick. "The Patrol's out and Joe's in command. Mr. Steve will advise, but he'll leave the rest up to the Wolves."

"And we won't fail him," stated the little fellow. "Come on, Hec. Find Dick!"

As they started for the mountain road, a canoe was shooting along the southern end of the lake. Alex knew every little bay and point. When no

one would play catch with him, fishing took up his time, and he knew his hours afloat would count now; but, of far more value, would be the memory of every landing and boat. In his own mind there was no question as to where Dick was. For some reason or other, sufficient to himself alone, Dick had chosen to repeat his former expedition on the water. Alex, knowing the camp boats were all accounted for, knew his task was to discover where a boat was missing from its mooring. He might run across the boy before he found out which craft was missing. If so, all the better. If not, he felt sure Dick would have gone to the upper end of the lake, where he had said he had been on that other night.

But boat after boat was in place. His paddle was biting deeper now. There was only one more which Dick could have borrowed. Ahead, he could see the mouth of the stream which fed the lake. The canoe raced around the little point. Alex saw, drawn up on the beach, the outline of a skiff. Dick Hunt was not on the water.

He heard the sound of running feet on the path leading down to the landing. The next instant Harve Foster appeared on the beach. "Any luck?" he called, as soon as he saw the canoe.

"No. Found anything?"

"No."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Begin on the paths. He may have fallen and been hurt. Stan's searching them further back. We're going to meet on the Fuller beach. Where're you goin'?"

"Don't quite know. Guess I'd better circle the lake again."

"Better give the Patrol call once in a while, Alex. We're going to. Dick may hear and answer."

"Good idea. Don't think he's on this side of the lake, though. Couldn't get across and wouldn't walk way round. Nothing to make him."

"Guess that's right. But we'll keep on looking. We've our orders. So long!"

"G'by!" Alex's paddle bit again, and Harve swung around and vanished.

From far down the lake came the two short, sharp yelps of the Patrol call. Alex's head went up but he did not answer. He knew it was Ned calling to Dick. A full minute passed. Then the cry went up from near at hand, as Harve, too, called. Another minute and, faintly, he heard the same cry far down the shore. Stan had found no trace of the missing boy. Alex waited anxiously to hear if the call would be repeated from the opposite shore. A minute passed, then another, and another. But Joe Lowell was still working in silence.

Joe, on leaving camp, had returned at once to Mr. Bray's. He knew he could rely on the big farmer, and he wanted him to know that Dick was still missing. Nor had he underestimated the man's anxiety. "You've got to find him and find him quick," he declared.

For a moment the boy looked him full in the face. "Do you expect anything to happen?" he asked.

"I don't expect; I'm afraid."

"So'm I. Dick hasn't an alibi now. I'm-"

He stopped abruptly. "Good night," he called, and waved his hand as he darted for the road.

For fifteen minutes he walked cautiously then, of a sudden, wheeled, vaulted a fence, and disappeared into the shadows. He was still in those shadows when he hard the call from the lake. But he heard them only as secondary things. It was because his whole attention was centered on something else that he, too, did not call,—because of that, and for fear that, if he so much as moved a hand, he might destroy Dick Hunt's one chance.

Yet, if anxiety was growing in intenseness about the shores of Forest Lake, it was also tightening the nerves of a man in Gillfield. Stephen Mayhew had wasted no time in starting his runabout for the Hunt home. From what Dick had told him, he had not expected to find him there. In that, at least, he had not been disappointed. He had managed to put his questions in such a way that Mrs. Hunt's fears had not been aroused, but for some reason which he refused to analyze, his own were doubled. As he jumped into his machine again he looked

down the empty street as if hoping to see the missing boy coming toward him. But not even a shadow moved. His hand reached to release the brake, and then the big car ran smoothly down the hill headed for the open road.

He was afraid to drive at full speed lest he pass Dick without seeing him. Yet he met but few people and none were boys. It was not until he came to the foot of the mountain that he saw two figures under his lights. The car slid to a stop and Tug and Nick jumped to the running board. "Found him?" they panted.

"No. Got any trace of him here?"
"No."

"He isn't behind me. Get in and we'll go to camp. Hold Hec, Tug; we're going fast."

They did. Neither boy had dreamed a car could roar up the mountain at such speed. For once, Hec was glad to bury his nose in Tug's coat and keep still. But, as they came over the crest and out onto the plateau, Mr. Steve suddenly brought the car to a stop. "What's that!" he demanded sharply.

They both looked. In the distance a rosy glow appeared over the tops of the trees. "They've found him," cried Tug. "Nelse has lit the fire on the point. It's the signal."

"What point?"

"That one in front of camp."

"That's a mile the other side of camp," stated the man in a voice which shook in spite of his every effort. "It's another fire."

"Wha-wha-"

"It's another fire," he repeated, this time savagely, as his foot smothered the accelerator. "Hold tight and pray some Wolf's found Dick Hunt."

CHAPTER XIII

NELSE CAPTURES A SHADOW

Nelse Pease, seated alone in the darkness on the outermost rock of the point before the camp, saw that same faint pink glow turn to angry crimson. And, while it turned, he thought faster than he had ever thought before. Only too well he guessed its cause, placed it on the Slade farm. Behind him was the shoulder high brush pile he had built. Unlit, it meant that Dick Hunt was still unfound. But up the lake roared another fire which might have a far heavier meaning.

He knew the Wolves were scattered, that probably no two were together; that farmers, half-crazed by the knowledge that a fire bug was at large in their midst, would be in a state to demand explanations for the whereabouts of every one; and he came to his decision quickly. The Patrol must be called together. Leaping up, he ran to the pile and thrust a match into the nest of birch bark he had placed in its heart. An instant more, and the point was as light as day.

He was back on the rock now, his hands cupped to his mouth as he filled his lungs. Then out over the lake rang the rallying cry of the Wolf Patrol. From out on the lake came an answer. He knew Alex was driving home, his paddle bending under the full strength of his lean, strong arms. From the opposite shore first Harve, then Stan replied, not once, but twice, and he knew they were running at top speed. Then, far to his right, Ned took up the cry; but from the left came only silence. Again and again his high, clear voice rang out. But still Joe Lowell was silent.

From behind him came the scream of a siren. He merely wondered what that could be. Again it sounded. It was nearer now. He turned and saw the glare of headlights against the pines. Once more he called for Joe. An answer came, almost from the camp. But three voices responded instead

of the one he most wished to hear. A moment later he heard the scream of a brake, then saw three figures dash past the camp and into the circle of the flame. "Mr. Steve!" he cried.

"Where are the rest?" The Scout Master's question was sharp and tense.

"Coming in."

"Dick here?"

"No."

"Any trace of him?"

"Don't think so, sir."

"That fire wasn't to be lit unless he was found, was it?"

"No, sir." Nelse thought there was reproof in the query. "Thought it best to rally the Patrol, sir."

"Right! Where's this other fire?"

"I think it's on the Slade farm."

"Who's up that way?"

"Joe. But he hasn't answered me."

"Probably gone to Slade's," declared Mr. Steve as a quick frown flashed across his forehead. It was not like Joe to fail to heed that rallying cry. "How long will it take the others to get here?"

"Can't tell. They're coming as fast as they can. There's Alex, now. Harve will be longest. Twenty minutes, maybe."

Mr. Steve nodded. He had come with very definite ideas about what should be done. But he also had equally strong convictions about having these boys act on their own initiative. Nelse had done the right thing at the right moment. The Scout Master looked at him with steady eyes. "Joe left you in charge here?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. We've rallied on you; you're in command until you turn over to him. What's your plan?"

"To stay here until they all come in. If Dick comes, we'll all go to Slade's and help. If he doesn't, I'll stay here and send the rest."

"Good! Only thing to do. I'll take them in the car."

"You get any trace of Dick, Tug?" It was the first chance Nelse had had to question either Tug or Nick, yet he knew questions were useless. Had they had anything to report, it would have come out long before. His lips closed the tighter as Tug only shook his head.

"I found none," offered Alex. "That fire's as bad as the Bray one. Must be another barn. Wish the others would hurry."

Ned arrived, panting, a few minutes later. "Who found Dick?" he demanded.

"No one. Want the Patrol together. How far behind you is Harve?"

"Dunno. What's doin'?"

"Listen! Hec's barking," cried Tug. "Some one's coming."

"It's Fat, probably."

They waited silently until the big fellow pounded up to the camp. There was no need to waste time in questions. His face told his story. "Go ahead," ordered Nelse. "Mr. Steve needs you all. I'm going to stay here."

"What if Dick comes?" called back Mr. Mayhew.

"I'll keep him with me—if he comes. Don't stay any longer than you have to," he added longingly. "I want to know what's doin'."

"O'Connor's been over on the other side of the lake this evening," called back Harve. "I cut his trail at a couple of houses. If he shows up here, don't tell him all you don't know, Nelse."

"No, nor all I do," the boy muttered. "Not till I've found out why Joe doesn't show up, anyway." He picked up another arm full of brush and threw it on the fire. As it began to crackle, he heard the car start and knew he was alone again. Up the lake, the bigger fire seemed to be dying down. He turned his back on it and peered down the lake. He would have given all he had, could he have seen either of the missing boys returning, especially Dick Hunt.

The big car, with its overload, made a speed which showed Mr. Steve's anxiety. Before they had gone far along the road there was no longer

question as to where the fire was. They could see only too clearly that the big Slade hay barn was a furnace. It was the Bray conflagration over again, except that here no live stock was endangered. The boys were out of the car almost before it reached the farm yard. "Wait!" commanded Mr. Steve sternly. "You fellows stick with me."

He got out with a deliberation which was almost more than they could stand. With equal coolness, he led the way into the yard. There seemed a strange lack of excitement among the group collected. They appeared dazed and dumb. There was nothing the men could do but let the fire burn until it died from lack of food. The wind was strong, but in the right direction. The other buildings were not threatened. Mr. Steve was quick to size up the situation. So far as the fire was concerned, they could be only spectators. His eyes began to search the crowd for the two missing boys.

He had not gone half way across the yard when

a hand clutched his arm. He turned to find Chief O'Connor's face close to his. "Got all the boys with you, Mr. Mayhew?"

The thing he had dreaded had come, but he met it as he met everything. "No," he answered evenly; "three of them are not here."

"Who?"

"Joe Lowell, Pease, and Dick Hunt."

A glint stole into the Chief's eyes. "This fire was set, same as the other two," he stated with equal calmness. "Think I'd like to find young Hunt."

"So would we. But not for the same reason. You're absolutely wrong, O'Connor."

"Maybe I am. I want to give Hunt a chance to prove it, though."

"Hasn't Joe been here?"

"Haven't seen him."

"Then that's all the more reason for you to go slow, Chief. Pease is at the camp. I know where all but the two have been. But I know no more about Joe than about Dick Hunt, except that he

came up this way over two hours ago and none of us have seen or heard of him since. My cards are all on the table; that's all I know, except that, if Joe Lowell is unaccounted for, it is for some mighty good reason. He'd be here helping Slade, unless he had something much more important to do. So long as he isn't here, I'd be a bit cautious about accusing the other missing boy until both were found, if I were you."

"Thanks for the advice," retorted the Chief.
"I know you think the kid's all right. I don't think it's anything he can help, myself; he's crazy, that's all. He probably doesn't even know what he's done, let alone realize the seriousness of it. But these men up here do. They've got to be protected."

"I'm not going to argue about it, O'Connor," retorted Mr. Mayhew shortly. "I've given you my advice twice. You didn't put faith in my hint that we've had trouble with one man up here."

"Hold on!" broke in the Chief. "I don't neglect Mayhew tips. And I didn't that one. Hanson's furnished good alibis twice. Jim Donovan's up here now with me. I've sent him to find out where Hanson is to-night. Here he comes now." He turned to his associate, who had come hurrying up. "Well?" he snapped.

"Safe in bed," announced Officer Donovan.

"Had to wake 'em up. Mrs. Hanson called me proper for disturbin' 'em."

"All right." The Chief turned to Stephen Mayhew, a smile of triumph on his face. "Satisfied?" he asked.

"See Hanson, Jim?"

"No sir," chuckled the policeman. "Didn't have to. The old woman said he was tired an' ugly an' wouldn't get up less I was lookin' for real trouble."

"Can't say I admire your thoroughness," growled Mr. Steve and walked away.

"Leave him alone, Jim," warned the Chief. "He didn't mean anything. He's all broke up. Young Hunt's missing again. He's our bird. We've got to land him to-night. You sneak down to their camp and lay for him. I'll drop down later and pick you up."

"Right, Chief."

Donovan turned and started south toward Camp Lowell. The last thing in the world he would do would be to disobey an order. But he hated his task. He believed in the boys, and he liked Dick Hunt for the way he had faced trouble and won the respect of the Wolves. Not even the Chief could make him change his opinion that his superior was making a grave error. He swung doggedly along through the night, his head shaking from time to time, his slow brain seeking an answer to all which had occurred.

But while the Chief was laying plans for further action, Mr. Steve was not idle. He singled Slade out of the crowd and got him alone for a moment. They were long-time friends and the farmer told him all he knew in a few words. Like the Bray and Belknap fires, this one had started in the windward corner. It was well under way before discovered. He could offer no reason for its start,

except that some one must have set it. He didn't suppose he had an enemy in the countryside. He suspected no one, and he volunteered the information that the boys at Camp Lowell were about the best friends he had. Certainly he suspected none of them. Both he and Bray knew them. He didn't care what other men thought or said.

As the two men separated, Ned Field came up to the Scout Master. "Doesn't seem to be anything for the Patrol to do here, sir," he said; "don't you think we'd better get back on our real job? We ought to find Dick."

Mr. Steve looked at him evenly. "How are you going to do it?" he asked.

"I don't know," Ned acknowledged. "Carry on as we were, I guess. Joe's usually right about such things, and until he shows up, I reckon it's best to keep up the search as he organized it."

"Have you any theory about where Joe is?"
"No, but I've got a hunch."

"Let's have it, Ned."

"He couldn't have helped hearing the rally. He

didn't answer because he's found something somewhere which is important. He'd be the last one in the Patrol to disobey that call without a mighty good reason. He can't find us up here, if he needs us, because he doesn't know we're here. We ought to get back."

"I think so, too," agreed Mr. Steve soberly.

"But I don't quite agree with you about sending out the Patrol until Joe does turn up. I think I'll keep you all at camp until I hear from him."

"But Dick?"

"I'm putting even more faith in Joe's absence than you are, Ned. I think he's either found him, is on his trail, or has discovered something which is equally important. Get the fellows together and we'll go back. We're no use here."

It took Ned but a few seconds to round up the boys and start them for the road, where they had left the car. Within three minutes they were on their way to Camp Lowell; and only red coals glowed where the Slade barn had loomed but a short time before. But they left behind a group of

savage farmers who, each moment, became more insistent that this fire bug be run to earth and punished.

Back on the point before the camp, Nelse Pease sat by his fire and wondered what had happened at the Slade farm. He had watched the red in the sky turn to soft, glowing pink, then die down, and out. He had listened for the expected cry from Joe until his ears ached. The growing wind in the pines behind him was his only answer. He had given up all hope of Dick's appearing out of the darkness, but he thought Joe might come at any moment. And as the minutes passed, he became more and more anxious.

Then, of a sudden, he heard a dead branch snap. It sounded as if it came from behind the camp. The wind was not high enough to break the pines. It might be Joe. It might be Dick. Yet either would have called as they came home. The fire on the point would have been reason enough for that. He was on his feet, peering into the darkness. No second sound came.

He knew he had not imagined it. What had already occurred that night made his every nerve taut. He took half a dozen quick steps. He was between the fire and the camp. Of a sudden he realized that, were any one there, he was outlined against the flames, the most prominent thing on all the point. Before he thought, his voice rose high. "Who's there?" he demanded.

But the only answer was silence and the noise of the wind in the pines.

There was something in the air which made his flesh tingle. "Who's there?" he repeated.

No sound came from the woods behind the camp.

Why he should have become suspicious, he never knew. A dozen things might have caused that branch to snap. Yet he gave none a thought. Something told him that something was wrong. That silent voice was all he heeded. "Who's there?" he reiterated, and started for the corner of the camp on the run.

Before he had taken twenty steps, he slid to a halt. Among the shadows of the pines he saw a

deeper shadow move. "What do you want?" he demanded.

Again there was no reply.

Then it came over him. It was the fire bug. He was going to destroy their camp. Nelse Pease did not know what fear was, but he had his first taste of red anger. He started forward, head down. There was a crash in the brush, the pound of fleeing feet. He knew he had guessed correctly. But, whoever, it was, he had a long start. Instinct, rather than caution, brought Nelse to a stop. His hands cupped over his mouth. The rallying call of the Wolves rang out through the night.

From far up the road he thought he heard the answering scream of Mr. Steve's siren. He did not wait to make certain. Again he plunged forward. If they were returning from the Slade farm, the Patrol would watch the camp. His work lay ahead. It was his job to follow that speeding shadow. It had gone northward and up the hill behind the camp. It would be a long, hard chase. That was all he thought of. The danger to a

lone boy in pursuing a desperate fugitive never occurred to Nelse.

He was among the trees now. It was pitch black. He could see nothing. He knew there was a path to his right, edged toward it. The fire bug, if he knew the woods, must have taken to this in his flight. Nelse, head back, increased his speed.

He could hear nothing now. He had covered a good hundred yards, and wondered how many miles he must go. Then, out of the blackness, two strong arms clutched him. His heart came into his throat but his fists struck out with all his full young strength. He knew what fear was, now. But it was the fear of failure, the fear of being caught and made helpless with purpose unaccomplished, the fear of quitting without fighting to the very end.

His knuckles sang home. He heard the sharp grunts of pain. He tried to wrench free, to get a better swing. "Quit!" urged a voice which was strangely familiar in spite of its agony.

"Who are you?" he panted.

"Nelse! Stop! It's me."

Nelson's hands fell to his sides. The whole world was reeling. His faith in everything wavered like a candle in a draught. "You!" he gasped. "Oh, Dick!"

"What are you slugging me for? What's the matter?"

Nelse steadied himself against a tree. "What's the matter?" he repeated dully. "Don't you realize it was me by that fire? Didn't you hear me call? Don't you know I saw you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't try to bluff," he commanded, suddenly erect. "I know. I thought you were all right. We all did. We believed in you. You were a Wolf." He stopped, tried to think clearly. It was more than he could bear. He saw the future, saw the fellows broken-hearted, saw the Patrol, which he loved, dishonored; and, without weighing other things, he obeyed impulse. "Beat it!" he commanded. "Get as far from Gillfield as you

can and go fast. We'll give you a start somehow. But give me that Scout badge first."

"You're crazy!" cried Dick. "What's happened?"

"You know more about it than I do. Don't waste time. Get out."

"You're crazy! Come back to camp."

"That's the last place you're going near," shouted Nelse, and grabbed at him. But he was too late. Dick was speeding along the path to the lake. Nelse heard him ahead, tried to overtake him, knew he could not, and yelled a warning at the top of his lungs, hoping some of the crowd was already there to protect the place from this traitor in their midst.

His breath came in a great, glad gulp as he heard an answer to his call ring through the woods. "Catch him!" he shouted. "He's insane." On the road, leading to the camp, the siren shrieked. Nelse knew Mr. Steve and the boys were almost back. But his hope was in that voice which had answered first. It could only be Joe Lowell. But Joe would need quick help. With all his speed and strength, he left the path and went crashing through the brush on a straight line for the camp.

CHAPTER XIV

THE TRAIL IN THE GRASS

STEPHEN MAYHEW, hearing the shouts to his right as he drove down the rough lane, could not imagine what new trouble had come. But he was a man who acted even while he thought. He increased his speed until he feared the jarring jolts would hurl some of the boys into the brush. "Hang tight!" he commanded. "We're needed down there."

A moment more and it seemed as if he hurled the big car by main strength around the last turn. The headlights swept across the clearing before the camp, steadied, as the car slowed to a stop, and under their beams he saw two boys rush together and throw their arms about each other. Then, before he or any of those with him had time to seek explanation for such an unexpected show of affection, a third came whirling around the corner of the camp and dived headlong. The three went down in a tangled, struggling heap. And, as if to complete Stephen Mayhew's utter astonishment, he heard Nelse scream, "Hold him, Joe. Don't let him loose!"

He was out of his seat in a flash, the rest at his heels. A fight among the Wolves was an undreamed of thing. And what was occurring before the steps was nothing else. "Stop that!" he commanded, his voice shaking with anger. "What are you thinking about?"

Those who had come with him were dumb-founded. It was bad enough to see three Wolves locked and struggling; it was worse to see Mr. Steve blaze into rage. They halted, aghast, as he sprang forward, grabbed Nelse by the collar, and jerked him to his feet.

"What do you mean by this?" he snapped.

Nelse, rubbing his hand across his eyes as if dazed, suddenly pulled himself together and

straightened. "There's the missing Dick Hunt," he snapped back; "let him talk."

Joe Lowell jumped to his feet, but Dick, panting, did not try to rise. Bewildered, he looked up into the Scout Master's face. "When did you come?" he asked. "Oh, but I'm glad to see you!"

"It's mutual. Where have you been?"

"Just up there in the woods," the boy answered dazedly. "I—"

"Tell the truth," commanded Nelse. "They'll know sooner or later. Give it to 'em straight and get it over."

"Let Dick talk, Nelse," ordered Mr. Steve. "Don't worry about not getting your chance to explain."

"I don't quite know what did happen," Dick gulped. "I was coming back from the Brays' and some one up there in the woods grabbed me from behind, threw something over my head, and tied me to a tree. It's taken me ever since to work loose."

"That's a likely story, young feller," announced a voice from behind him. "Guess you'll have to do better than that for the Chief." Officer Donovan stalked into the group and laid his heavy hand on the boy's shoulder. "I want you," he stated grimly.

"Go slow with that stuff, Jim!" Stephen May-hew's voice was even, but there was no mistaking the command in it. He stooped and, grasping Dick's hand, lifted him to his feet. "Do you know that Slade's barn has just been burned to the ground?" he asked.

The boy swayed as if the man had struck him in the face. He saw it all now, comprehended to the full how things had closed in upon him. "No," he said in a low voice.

The rest were absolutely still. They, too, began to appreciate the seriousness of the situation. But Dick did not notice them; his eyes were fixed on Mr. Steve. "No," he repeated. "I knew something must be wrong; I heard the rallying cry. I tried to answer but that bag thing was over my mouth then."

"Who attacked you?"

"I don't know. It was dark. He was behind me."

"You must have some suspicion. You've got to be absolutely frank, Dick. Who do you think it was?"

"There's only one person down on me up here that I know of. But I don't think even he'd do such a thing."

"Who's that?"

"Hanson."

"No good, son!" broke in Donovan. "You can't squirm out that way. Hanson's home and in bed."

"That's where you make your first mistake, Mr. Donovan." It had been like Joe Lowell to allow others to talk until he could see his own way clearly. Now he took one step forward and faced the officer, his jaw square.

"What do you know about it?" demanded Donovan.

"A good deal that you evidently don't. The rest drew closer. Joe had exploded one bomb; they knew what was to come would be even more jarring. "When we missed Dick after supper,"

he went on coolly, "I turned out the Patrol to find him. But, instead of hunting Dick myself, I hunted some one else. I went to Hanson's house and hid in the yard. I saw him go out at eight o'clock. I saw you come there about 9:30. I heard Mrs. Hanson bluff you off. Hanson hadn't come back. He was not in the house. He hasn't been there since. I think he caught Dick and tied him up so he'd be missing when he set that third fire. Hanson's your man, not Dick Hunt."

It was Harve Foster who let out a whoop of triumph. But Mr. Steve checked it before the rest could join in. "Go slow!" he commanded. "That's mostly surmise. Joe, it's good work, but all it really proves is that Hanson wasn't where Donovan thinks he was. It brings him into it, but it proves nothing against him. We've heard you and Dick; Nelse must have something which will explain his actions. Let's have it, Nelse."

If ever a boy had been torn between suspicion and knowledge, it was Nelson Pease. He had liked Dick Hunt, had admired his quiet ways, his manner of keeping in the background, his bravery in facing trouble, and his loyalty to the Wolves. Then had come the crash. He had caught him sneaking up to the camp, challenged him, chased him, captured him fleeing, given him a chance to escape. Now Mr. Steve demanded the truth. Nelse would have lied for no one. But, since Joe had spoken, he would have given his right hand to have been out in the middle of the lake alone. "I'll only ball things up worse," he protested uncomfortably.

"Out with it!" commanded Mr. Steve.

Nelse bit his lip. He could not look at Dick, he didn't want to see Mr. Steve's face when he told his story. He turned to Joe as if for relief. "I lit that fire on my own responsibility," he said; "I called in the Patrol when I saw the Slade fire."

"Never mind that part, Nelse; what really happened? Why did you jump all over Dick a few minutes ago?"

"I was over there alone by my fire. I heard a noise back of the camp. I called. No one answered. It flashed over me that the fire bug was after our camp. I ran here, saw some one duck into the woods. Then I followed and," he added, in a dull, low voice, "I caught Dick."

"Guess that's about all," declared Donovan. "Your own crowd prove him guilty, Mr. Mayhew."

"But I was the one who caught Nelse," protested Dick. "I hadn't been near the camp. I was just coming down here. I'd just gotten loose. It was some one else who was here."

"How do you know that?"

"It must have been. It wasn't me."

"That won't hold water," growled Donovan. "You're it, Hunt."

"Just keep cool, Jim," warned Mr. Steve. "Suppose we let Dick lead us to the place where he was tied. If he's telling the truth, and I won't believe he or any other Wolf would do anything else, we'll find the things he was bound with."

"He's sharp enough to provide the stuff to complete his alibi."

"Nevertheless you'll do as I request, I think, Donovan," said Mr. Mayhew in a voice which made the boys stiffen. "Harve, get a lantern."

Fat started for the kitchen door on the run but, as he reached the steps, he came to a halt, and his head went up. As if to make sure, he sniffed again. "Say," he called, "there's smoke. There's a fire somewhere. Which way's the wind?"

"Coming down hill from the northwest," answered Alex. "It's your imagination, though.

Get that lantern."

"It isn't," Harve called back. "There's another fire somewhere. Can't you smell it?"

He was so in earnest that Mr. Steve turned. He knew Harve would not trifle at such a time. His own nostrils caught the pungent smell. "You're right!" he agreed. "Donovan, this thing's getting more serious."

"Got so more than two days ago," growled the officer. "You're right, though; it's smoke, sure."

"It's up wind from here. There are no buildings

in that direction. It's our woods! Stan," he cried, "jump in the car and sit on that siren. We need help. Alex, run to Slade's. There are men still there. Quick! I can see the glow of the flames now."

"But what started it," faltered Tug. "I can see it, too."

"I don't know who started it," retorted Mr. Steve, "but I'm sure Nelse saw some one beside Dick, and that 'some one' can answer your question."

"Oh!"

"Do you mean that, sir?"

"But it will burn the camp, unless we can stop it. The wind's right," declared Nick.

"I think that's why it was started," was the cool answer. Mr. Steve turned to Joe. "Take the Patrol up there," he commanded. "Fight it with boughs. If it's beyond control, send word. Donovan and I'll start a back fire, if you report that it's necessary. We've got to work fast till help comes."

There was no doubt about the fire now. A dull,

red glow appeared like a crown on the crest of the hill. They knew exactly where it was. During the wartime fuel shortage, Old Boss Mayhew had had about an acre cut out of the edge of the woods for fuel and, because he was too busy to oversee the work, it had been carelessly done. The slash had been left where it fell and had dried until it was as inflammable as powder. Whoever had started it knew his work.

For three weeks the Wolves had rejoiced because there had been no rain to interfere with their fun. Now they would have given half their all had it rained incessantly. The slash was a furnace. They could hear the roar of the flames. There came a louder and an uglier sound; the first of the towering pines exploded like a rocket. Flames and sparks shot high into the air. "No need to send for help," stated Mr Steve; "hold your crowd here, Joe. You'd be helpless up there."

"What shall we do?"

"Better detail Tug and Alex to get the stuff out of the camp. I'm afraid it's doomed. Pile things at the edge of the lake. The rest of you come with me. I'm going to back fire."

"Where'll you start it, sir?"

Stephen Mayhew drew a long breath. "On the edge of our own clearing," he retorted grimly. "It's the only chance to save the building. The woods are doomed. It's hard luck, fellows, but we'll have to make the best of it. Spread out and start fires. Don't let 'em run back."

"Gimme two lads to lug water an' I'll get on the roof," offered Donovan. "Wet some blankets and we'll care for the sparks."

"Good! I'll be with you as soon as I get the back fire going," agreed Mr. Steve. Already he held a flaming bunch of birch bark in his hand. The next moment and he had thrust it into the top of a young pine. For a second there was only smoke; the next and it was a torch, and he was at work on another twenty feet away.

Ten minutes more and they were choking in the ever thickening smoke. The heat was intense, but the back fire was eating its slow way up the hill.

On the roof, Jim Donovan and Harve were working like mad men. Sparks were falling all about them but they had the shingles thoroughly wet now. Flaming brands were what they beat out with their clubbed and dripping blankets. The crowd from Slade's began to arrive. Two farmers clambered up to help on the roof. "We'll save one building, anyway," declared the first. "Got a fightin' chance here."

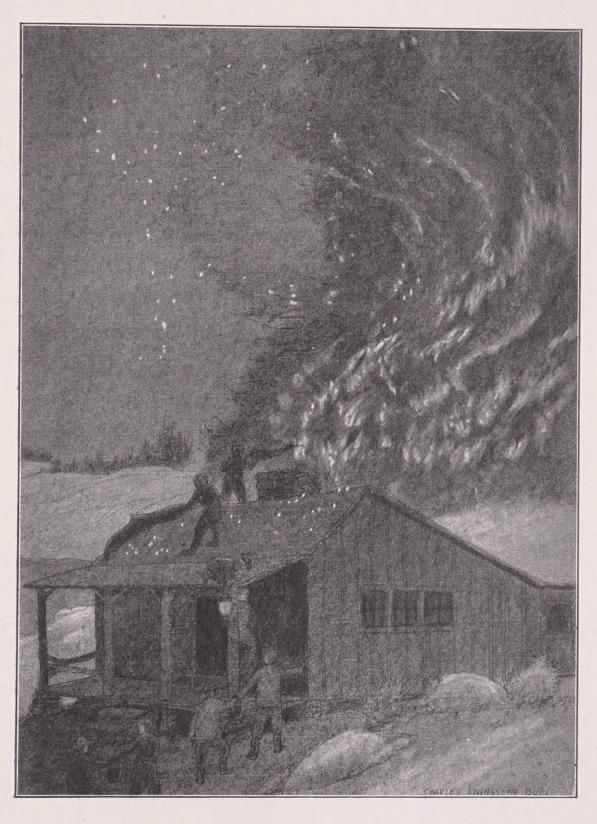
Tug, as he toted another load out of the camp and started toward the shore, saw Chief O'Connor hurrying toward him. "Mr Mayhew here?" he demanded.

"He's everywhere," announced the little fellow. "Think we'll save our camp, Chief?"

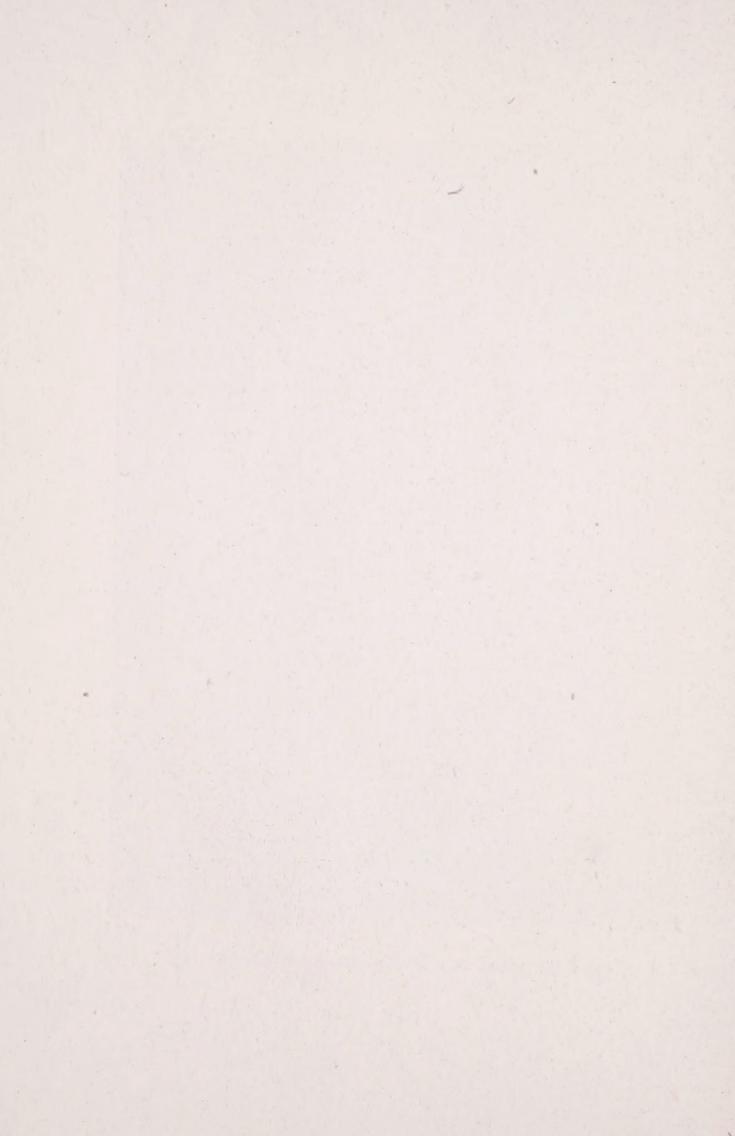
"Know in ten minutes."

Joe Lowell came racing up. He leaped to the top of the steps and made a trumpet of his hands. "Everybody form a line between here and the lake," he cried. "Want a bucket brigade. More water needed for the roof."

The men did not stop to consider that it was a



"ON THE ROOF, JIM DONOVAN AND HARVE WERE WORKING LIKE MADMEN"



boy who gave orders; they saw the need. "If we're caught on the point, we'll have to take to the lake," said one with a queer laugh. But he fell into line with the rest.

The heat, now, was as unbearable as the smoke. The fire swept down the hill before the wind with a triumphant roar. Donovan, dizzy and gasping, slipped, clutched, fell crashing from the roof. Even before Mr. Steve and Nick had picked him up, a farmer had climbed over the veranda roof and taken up the work.

"She's comin'!" Harve's voice rang loud above the terrifying noise. They knew what he meant. The buckets came faster. Men were about the three threatened sides of the camp, fighting sparks, blazing branches, little fires in the short grass. They did not pause to look up. The sooner it happened, the better. The two fires were almost one. A dozen felt that their features were nothing but searing blisters. But they were bound to cheat the fire bug this time.

It seemed eternity; it was only a moment.

Then Harve yelled again. This time there was no warning in his voice, only choking triumph. "She's slowin' up!" he bellowed. "Gimme another bucket."

The farmers, too, began to shout. The worst was over. They knew they had saved Camp Lowell. Mr. Bray, who had done the work of three, broke from the front rank. "Half of you can hold it now," he called; "rest come help me keep it from spreading south into my mowin'."

"Go on," urged Mr. Mayhew. "We're safe here."

He started to climb to the roof to relieve Harve, when Dick caught him by the sleeve. "Need me for half an hour, sir?"

The Scout Master's face clouded. It was no time for a Wolf to do anything but work. But, before he could refuse, O'Connor stepped forward. "I need you, if he doesn't," he stated, his hand falling on the slender shoulder.

The boy stiffened. But, as he saw Mr. Steve

start to speak, he turned on O'Connor. "And I need you," he declared. "Come!"

O'Connor hesitated for an instant and, in that instant, Dick had slipped past him and was tearing along the shore of the lake. The Chief gasped with surprise. He thought it was an attempt to escape. His hand snapped to his hip but Stephen Mayhew grabbed his wrist. "Go with him," he commanded; "he knows what he's doing."

"So do I," yelled the Chief, and started after the little figure which had disappeared into the eddying smoke.

He caught him just at the northern boundary of the woods. "What do you think you're doin'?" he demanded roughly. "I've had enough of your funny business. You come with me."

The boy flashed around. "Do you want to catch this fire bug?" he demanded.

"Reckon I have," was the sharp answer.

"You haven't. But I can take you to him now. Give me a chance. The fellows have. Give me my chance to clear myself. You can have the reward. All I want is a chance."

"Yes, to do a get-away," sneered the Chief.

"I don't. I don't," he cried. "I can prove where I've been to-night. I was at camp when the woods fire started. You've got handcuffs," he rushed on desperately; "put 'em on me." He held out his wrists pleadingly. "But come. Come!"

The Chief looked at him keenly. The boy was too much in earnest to be utterly neglected. He remembered Mr. Mayhew's faith in him. "I don't see your game," he acknowledged, after a moment's thought, "but I'll take a chance. But don't you take one, young feller, or you'll regret it. I mean—"

"Don't waste time talkin'," broke in Dick excitedly. "Come on!" He raced up the hillside, O'Connor close at his heels. To the left the woods smouldered with only an occasional burst of flame. The heart of the fire, driven by the northwest wind, had run diagonally down the hill. Dick nodded as if what he saw confirmed his be-

lief. Once he left the edge and made a short circle out into the standing grass. It would have to be guarded from the flame soon, but his heart beat faster because he had arrived ahead of the men.

It was not until he had reached the crest of the hill that he spoke. "Ought to be near here," he muttered, as if talking to himself.

"What had?"

"Where it started. Look!" he cried. "Look!" "It's only embers. You've passed a dozen places

like it," growled the Chief.

"No, we haven't. There's been fire all round the others; it's only on three sides of this."

"That doesn't tell me anything."

"It tells me where the fire started. I'm going to find something which will tell us both a lot more. Stand still. I'm going to trail that fire bug."

The Chief suddenly saw the light. "Say!" he declared, "you're teaching me something."

"The Scouts have taught me something; let's see if it won't help us both when we need it most."

"Can you do it, Dick?" The Chief could cer-

tainly change front rapidly when he saw clearly.

"I can try. The dew's heavy. It ought to be easy." He took another little circle out into the field.

The Chief, standing by the edge of the fire, watched him closely. Dick was bent far over, eyes fixed on the ground. Of a sudden he stooped still lower, then straightened and came slowly back until he stood at the very edge of the glowing embers. "I've got it," he declared excitedly. "I thought I'd find it. Will you follow me?"

"Go ahead."

"But stay behind me."

"Don't worry, I understand now."

"See that foot mark?"

The Chief stooped. It was plain enough, now that his attention was called to it. All around it the dew still clung to the damp grass. The fire bug had failed to remember that he could leave a trail.

Dick's pace quickened. It was easy work, here in the open. He hoped it would continue so. He heard the murmur of a little brook ahead. Its

bank might give him further proof. He hurried on, the Chief close at his heels.

On its bank, he paused, stooped, then straightened slowly, his whole attitude changed. "I'm sorry," he faltered; "this is his back track. See that heel mark?"

To his utter surprise O'Connor laughed grimly. "It's good enough for me," he stated; "keep on."

"But it's taking us away from where he's gone. It's the back track," he repeated.

"Which way's it leading?"

"North."

"Where to?"

"I don't know."

"I do," declared the Chief. "It's leading to the Slade barn. That fence is Slade's boundary. And the Slade barn was fired just before your woods were. That's a man's footprint. Let me see the sole of your shoe."

"Wha—Wha—!" Dick stammered, as he raised his foot.

"Humph! No nails. Look at that mud. I'll

explain later. Can you run faster than you ever ran in your life?"

"I can try."

"Then get back to camp and tell Donovan to take Mr. Steve's car and come to me as fast as he can drive."

"Where'll he meet you?"

"At Hanson's house. Go!"

CHAPTER XV

AN UNEXPECTED GIFT

So much had happened the night before, that when the Wolves finally got to sleep, they lay like logs in their bunks. There had been so many things to explain, so much to discuss, that the camp and its surroundings were given little thought. Even at breakfast the conversation was still of Hanson. It was Mr. Steve, who had spent the night with them, who at last brought them back to earth. "What has happened, has," he stated; "but what has got to happen is the thing which should interest you chaps now. Things outside are in a mess. What are you going to do about it?"

Joe, at the other end of the table, put down his cup. "I tried not to look around when I went down for my swim," he confessed. "It's pretty

dreary, with everything black and gray behind us."

"It burned the rubbish pile, anyway," observed the optimistic Nelse. "We haven't got to lug that away now."

"It's the mess close to the camp I'm thinking of," Mr. Steve stated. "That back fire left only a mighty thin fringe between us and desolation, and it ate through in several places."

"There's only one thing to do," declared Stan, "and that's to police things up around here before we tackle what's left of the scenery. That's going to be a big job, and we ought to be a Troop, instead of a Patrol, to do it right. But we've the rest of the summer."

"You're not thinking of clearing the whole hillside, are you?" smiled the man.

"I'm thinking of it," owned Stan, "but I think of all sorts of impossible things, like Fat lugging burnt trees around in his mouth. Seriously, though, Mr. Steve, I do believe we chaps can pitch in and clean up a good deal of the mess before fall. We can clean from the camp to the foot of

the hill, pile up the burnt stuff, burn it, and use the salvaged ground as a garden next summer."

"I refuse to spend my vacation hunting potato bugs," promptly declared Harve. "If you want to have a flower garden, I'm for it; that is," he added, "if you'll raise only blue sunflowers. I like them to wear in my button-hole."

"When you get through weeding the corn, you won't care about anything you wear except your blisters," promised Nelse. "I think it's a good scheme, Stan. I raised a string bean in my war garden; I'll show you how to grow another."

"This will be a man-sized job," observed Mr. Steve; "you don't want to forget all the stumps you'll have to get out."

"Hec'll dig those up," agreed Nelse.

"You're all wrong," stated Fat. "If you knew Nature like I do, you'd know how luscious red raspberries and cute little blueberries grow on burnt ground. All we've got to do is sit tight and reap our harvest next year."

"I'm for clearing the flat ground right away," voted Tug.

"So'm I."

"So are all the rest of us, you nuts!" said Harve.

"Only I hate the thought of all that work so much that I want the kicking all over before we begin. It's going to be a lot of work," he went on soberly; "we're going to wish we had more willing little workers."

"Hi, you Wolves!"

The call brought them all to their feet. There was the sound of eager steps on the veranda and the next instant Bill Long appeared in the doorway, the Foxes crowding against his back. "Good morning, everybody," he said. "We heard about your hard luck down in town and thought we'd come up and see if we could help. Caught a ride most of the way."

"Good lads!"

"Bully for you!"

Bill grinned, but that faded as he came into the room. "There's something we want to get off

our chests before we do or say anything else," he announced. "We heard a lot of wild talk down in Gillfield and, while we don't know what's happened up here, we've voted unanimously that we believe in old Dick, that we're for him and with him and that he, and the rest of the Wolves, can count on the Foxes till the cows come home to roost."

"Hear! Hear!"

"But don't you know?"

"Haven't you heard?"

But Long only waved his hand as he walked straight to Dick Hunt. "You're all right," he said, "and they've given you a raw deal." He gripped his hand and shook it. "You're not the sort who quits under fire," he stated.

"You bet he isn't!" howled Nelse. "Under fire's where that boy shines. Tell 'em the glad tidings, Dick."

But Dick was in no condition to explain at that moment. After all he had been through, it was more than he could stand to have this whole crowd march in and tell him they trusted him, believed in him, were his friends. His throat felt full and he couldn't see very well. All he could do was hang tight to Bill Long's hand.

"I suppose it's up to me to make a speech," sighed Fat. "I do all the work around here, Bill. I'm going to set this to music later on and go round the country giving concerts with it. If you'll keep those rough necks of yours from interrupting with applause, I'll begin at the end and work backwards. Most of you haven't intelligence enough to get it any other way."

"Thanks for them kind words!" chuckled Jack Swift. "But suppose you overlook yourself for a few seconds and tell us about Dick. Evidently there's somethin' doin' we need wiseing up on."

"Didn't ever expect to hear you acknowledge it, Jack. Drape yourself on the furniture and list. Chief O'Connor's had a brain storm and, the last we saw of him, it had developed into a whirlwind and was going round in circles. If you haven't heard what he suspected, we aren't going to repeat it, even to you Foxes. It's forgotten.

Anyway," he went on, "when our own private fire was started last night the Chief didn't seem to be sure whether he was going or coming. He was really crawling sideways."

"Quit braying and get somewhere," urged Bill.

"Shut up!" snapped Harve. "I'm sketching in the literary background."

"Thought this was a concert," suggested Eb Wilder.

"All right!" groaned Harve. "Take it between the eyes, then: Dick and Joe hung all these fires on Hanson and proved it to O'Connor. Hanson's the fire bug and the Chief's hot on his trail."

"Then Dick's absolutely cleared?"

"And then some!" yelled Nelse. "He's the chap who really proved it on Hanson. He picked up his trail and followed it till he'd satisfied the Chief that there was nothing to it but Hanson. He'd suspected him all the time. But there's a lot more."

"Never mind it now," broke in Bill; "I've got

all I need to go on. Let's give a few cheers for Dick."

There was so much noise, so many congratulations flying about, so much pounding of backs and general jubilation that none heard the insistant honking of the automobile horn from the lane. Nor did any hear the firm step on the veranda, nor see the upright figure in the doorway until Mr. Steve raised his hand for silence. "We've another visitor, fellows," he called above the roar. "Let's see what he wants."

They wheeled around to find Chief O'Connor gazing at them, his face lined with fatigue, his clothes gray with dust. "Some one kicked over the beehive?" he asked, with a tired smile. "Or is this just a reunion in an asylum?"

"Hello, Chief!"

"Three cheers for the Chief!"

They, too, were given with a vim nothing could check. The boys were beside themselves. They thought it was all because of their joyous relief; they did not remember how tired they were and

what a relief it was to have this nerve racking strain of the past days behind them.

"Thanks," returned O'Connor grimly. "I don't feel as if I deserved cheers from you boys. I wouldn't blame you if you hooted every time you saw me. I'd take that just as I'm going to take my other medicine—and that's on both feet with my hand out." He came in and walked deliberately to Dick Hunt. "The best of us make mistakes," he announced; "mine was more brutal than most. I'd no business to let by-gones carry weight. It's a thing too many of us officers do. But, instead of my hurting you, Dick, you saved me. Except for you, I never would have caught Hanson."

"You've caught him?" It was a chorus, this question.

The Chief nodded. "In Kendallville this morning. He was heading for a train. He confessed to setting all four fires. And he's also confessed to having trailed you round the country so's he could start 'em in such a way that we'd suspect you. He's terribly down on you for some reason, Dick.

He'd have murdered you last night, when he caught you in the woods, only he says he was afraid. There's one thing about Hanson,—he's insane. But every fire bug is."

"Good work! Congratulate you."

"Thought you'd like to know. That's why I stopped on my way home. He's safe in jail until we can put him where he'll be watched and cared for. I'd like to have you boys spread the news around the lake. It will make a lot of people up this way sleep easier."

"It certainly will," agreed Stephen Mayhew.

"A lot of people in this camp will sleep a whole lot easier. But we'd like to hear the whole story,

Chief. How did you trail him to Kendallville?"

"Not half as cleverly as Dick did from this fire to the one at Slade's. I only added together what he gave me and what I'd found out yesterday. Dick did the real work. And that's another thing I'd like to speak about, Mr. Steve. You offered a reward of five hundred dollars for the capture of the fire bug. I may have done the final act, but

Hanson'd still be at large if it hadn't been for Dick. I waive all claim to that reward in his favor. Dick," he added, abruptly putting his hand on the slender shoulder, "you've earned it, you deserve it, you're going to get it."

"You're a regular man, O'Connor, and you're right."

"I have to be sometimes," laughed the big fellow. "I'm going now. But I'd like one reward before I do go. Dick, will you tell them all that you have forgiven me?"

"Of course I will. I don't blame you at all for thinking what you did. I was—"

"Never mind what you were," yelled Nelse. "You're all right and always will be."

"If you propose three more nifty cheers for that fire-bug-hound," wailed Harve, "my throat will bust. Have a heart! I'd rather pick up cinders, and ten minutes ago that was the last thing in the world I yearned to do."

Tug Wilson, who knew from experience just

how Dick felt, tried to rush to his rescue. "So long as the Foxes have volunteered to help us clean up," he said, "let's get to work."

"Say!" laughed Bill Long, "we can work any old time, but we don't have a show like this every day. I want to hear more."

"So do the rest of us," agreed Eb. "Wait a minute; I've got an idea."

"You'll lose it, if you wait that long," comforted Nelse.

"Not this one, old son. It's a peach. It's a little bit of all right for the Foxes to be in on this with you Wolves. But it can be made a heap better. Dick's done something the whole Troop is going to be proud of. Let's get, hold of Mr. Nelson and get him to get all the Scouts together. Then Mr. Mayhew can present Dick with that five hundred before us all."

"Fine!"

"Great idea!"

"You've come through at last, Eb. We'll do it." Mr. Steve saw terror replace confusion on Dick's

flushed face. "Not in a thousand years!" he laughed. "I'm not making any Roman holiday of myself and I don't believe Dick wants to deliver any oration. I'll give him a check quietly and he can take it equally quietly and do what he wants with it."

"Can I?" Dick's voice was suddenly eager.

"You sure can, old fellow!"

"All right. I'll take it under those conditions, and if the Chief approves," he agreed, his eyes sparkling.

"Don't worry about me," said O'Connor. "I'm with you from now on."

"Fine! Now I'm going to try to make a speech and please don't any of you try to rattle me," he begged. "I owe everything to you fellows. You've shown me what it is to be a Scout. I've tried to be one, and I guess I wouldn't be here and happy now if I hadn't tried to make myself like you."

"Bunk!" exploded Harve.

"Please don't" begged Dick. "I'm serious; I

Even Nelse tried to help me when he thought I was the fire bug. But I kinder expected it from the Wolves. You've made me one of you. But when Bill came this morning with the Foxes and said they all trusted me—well—well—" He faltered a second and his voice broke. "Well, that was almost more than I could stand," he finished with a rush.

"You're a Scout," stated Bill quietly. "You could have been a Fox, if you hadn't wanted to be a Wolf."

"It's because I can't be both that I want to do this," retorted Dick. "You Foxes have said you wanted to have a camp near us here on the lake. I know you've been earning money to build one. We Wolves want you here."

"You bet we do!"

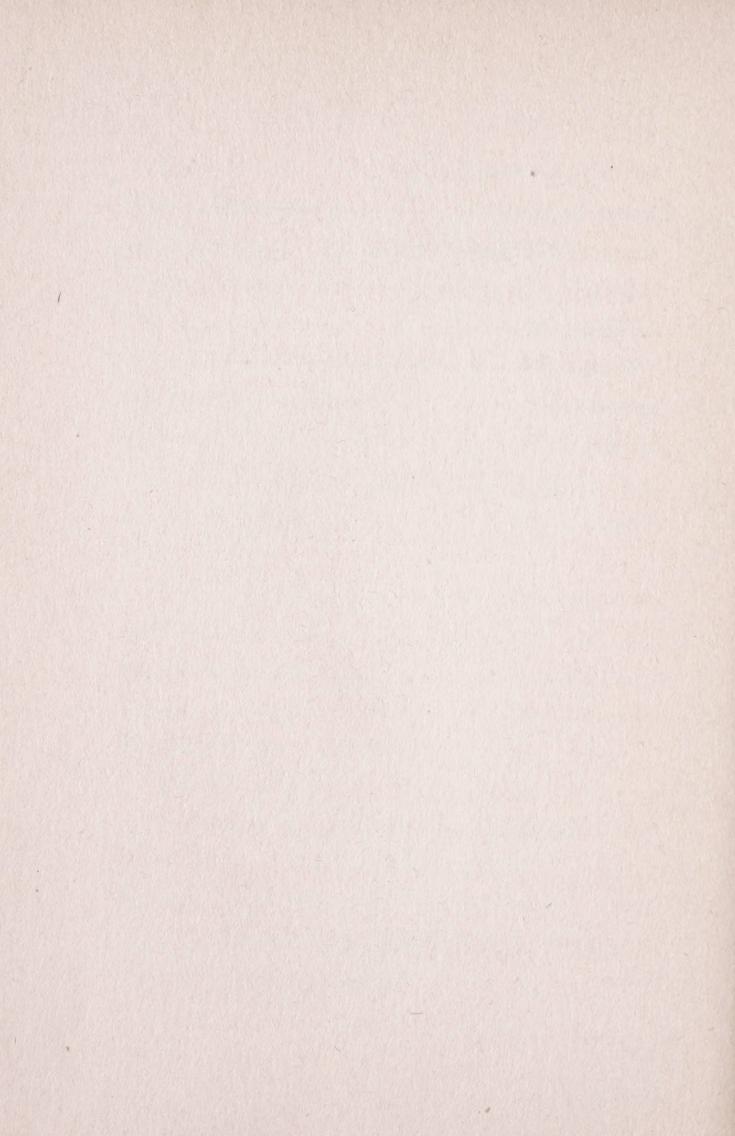
"And we're going to have you next year," declared Dick. "That's why Mr. Steve's going to make that check payable to the Fox Patrol. Scouting was what let a Scout, not Dick Hunt, win it; it's going to be used by Scouts." "Do you mean that, Dick?" Mr. Steve's eyes glowed with pleasure. This was the sort of reward that made his work worth while.

"I do."

"Then it's settled."

"But—but," Bill Long tried to realize it all. He looked from one to another of the astounded, jubilant Foxes. "I—I hate to bust your throat, Fat," he gulped, "but three times three for Dick Hunt, the real Scout!"

THE END



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